

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES
IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Anna Markowska

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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From the editor:

Trickster in democratic and non-democratic systems

A rascal, swindler, jockey, hooligan, or simply a trickster has immense merits in the field of art. In our times, trickster strategies are eagerly used in revealing power relations in post-communist and post-colonial countries. African history of art is abundant in tricksters. In Polish art history, however, they were discovered as recently as in the art of the 1970s. Undoubtedly, some of the books that contributed to the understanding of the role of a trickster were Piotr Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945–1989* (2005) and Łukasz Ronduda's *Polish Art of the 70s* (2009) peopled with intriguing cheats and rogues, though neither Piotrowski nor Ronduda use the term 'trickster'. They show, however, that artists using neo-avant-garde strategies turned out to be efficient in the disassembly of modernism and destabilization of unwritten consensus within communist authority. It is the so-called "artists of the neo-avant-garde pragmatism", as Ronduda calls them, such as KwieKulik duo, that within Sots Art criticised the socialist state for its authoritarianism,¹ breaking up the unwritten consensus of artists and communist authorities underlying the new status quo that, along with the regime of Władysław Gomułka (since 1956 he was the First Secretary

of the Polish United Workers' Party), followed the withdrawal from imposing social realism in Poland. Later, in the 1970s (during the so called "Gierek decade" – from 1970 to 1980 Edward Gierek superseded Gomułka on his position as the First Secretary) Paweł Freisler's actions showed some models, authorities and norms taken to the extreme, e.g. Freisler made a model of an egg in the Zamech factory in Elbląg and attempted to register it in The International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Sèvres. Normativity was taunted also by Andrzej Lachowicz. His *Model of Zero Situation* (1970, [ill. 1](#)) was a mere mockery of ideal mental constructions, in this particular case of an "ideal black standard". Moreover, a white cube with a black circular surface in the middle of one wall and a small hole inside it seemed to dialogue with the suprematist tradition, asking about the legacy of the avant-garde. Does its radicalism enable one to broaden the horizons or rather to always feel beneath adequate quality and requirement? Lachowicz's answer is trickstery intermediating. In turn, Leszek Maluga, an architect from the Wrocław University of Technology, ridiculing the classified nature of numerous military structures (the Russians prohibited printing detailed maps of some areas in Poland) designed a complete project of a UFO landing strip, naturally, not coordinating it with the authorities of the

¹ Ronduda (2009: 14).



Ill. 1. Andrzej Lachowicz, *Model of zero situation*, (the so-called "ideal black standard"), 1970, reconstruction at the *Where is Permafo?* exhibition in Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław 2012

Warsaw Pact. His *UFO-Port 1* project was exhibited in 1980 in the X Gallery, Wrocław² (ills. 2–3). And Zdzisław Jurkiewicz, a visual artist and his pal, simultaneously wrote an ode to an alien expecting to land in the designed UFO-port.

New light on writing the history of countries from the Soviet Union influence zone is shed by the nowadays popular post-colonial methodologies, although Piotr Piotrowski, an outstanding historian of Central European art, warns against using a methodology designed on the basis of post-colonial countries to analyse what was happening in Central Europe.³ Piotrowski writes that it was modernism that determined the identity of Central Europe in 1945–1989,⁴ and although it should be understood as identifying modernism with the period of dependence on the Soviet Union, at the same time he stipulates that "it is difficult to treat modern art as a tool to colonise Eastern and Central Europe through Western Europe."⁵ It cannot be

concealed, however, that the modern Polish were inspired by anachronistic and conservative mainstream Parisian modernism, enabling stabilised, essentialistic understanding of art as a jewel of culture, and the role of an artist as a depositary of the highest values, i.e. maintaining symbolic power.

After the Stalinist period, at the time of the so-called thaw, Polish artists – when they began to travel to the West and try to keep pace with contemporary art – completely did not notice the art of Jean Dubuffet or Asger Jorn or the *l'internationale situationniste* movement. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev notes that the art of postcolonial countries and those not belonging to the West was often limited to obligatory imitation of elegant Parisian formalism represented by Alfred Manessier, Jean Bazaine, Gustave Singier and Auguste Herbin.⁶ Art began to be treated as a compensatory activity satisfying ambition and prestige, which became convenient for both artists and authorities. Of course, it can be explained by an insufficiency of culture in Poland and a willingness to cultivate traditions in a coun-

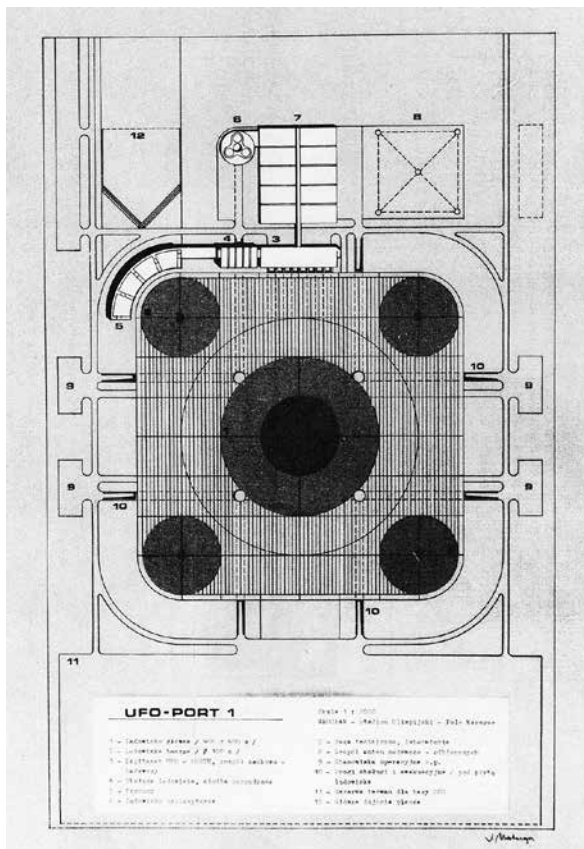
² Szkopek (2012:64).

³ Piotrowski (2010: 36–44).

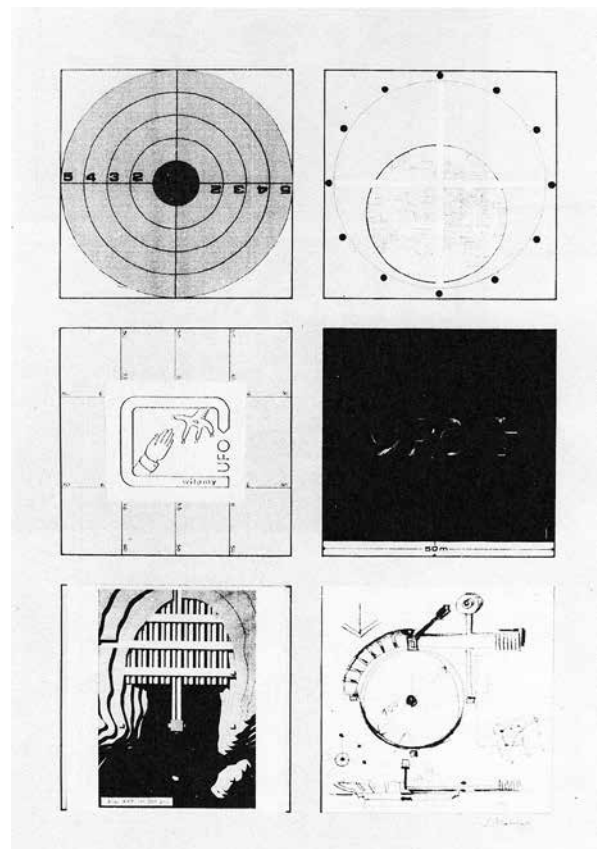
⁴ Piotrowski (2010: 45).

⁵ Piotrowski (2010: 46).

⁶ Christov-Bakargiev (1997: 82).



Ill. 2. Leszek Maluga, *UFO-Port 1*, project (1980), courtesy of The Ossolineum - National Ossoliński Institute, Wrocław



Ill. 3. Leszek Maluga, *UFO-Port*, details, courtesy of The Ossolineum - National Ossoliński Institute, Wrocław

try where radical socio-political changes were being performed. But this diagnosis, justifying cultural traditionalism, should be complemented with some questions – what caused post-war Polish art to be so closed to cultural dissimilarity, to joke and distrust of authority? Why was the authority of the centre and a preference for ready-made solutions so important? Even though defending the subject that is typical for modernism is also characteristic of post-colonialism, it is, of course, a completely different subject, which is proved by the post-colonial and postmodernist trickster – a subject that is distracted, devoid of consequences, not aspiring to become a titan-genius sure-footedly heading for the future fulfilment. In the context of Poland Piotr Piotrowski describes a different situation on the Czech neo-avant-garde stage of the 1970s, perversely quoting a joke of Hugo Demartini who believed that if the Russians had not entered Czechoslovakia, Czech artists would have ended up as professors and official creators.⁷ As we know, a part of progressive Polish artists ended up just like that, even before

the fall of the Soviet regime. And, as Piotrowski noted, Polish neo-avant-garde stage, although very dynamic and rich in events, was at the same time very poor as far as direct political criticism was concerned.⁸ The author also notes that although conformist tendencies manifesting in the uncriticalness of art were almost ubiquitous in the 1970s Poland, the situation in the field of literature was completely different.⁹

According to Hal Foster, in the USA the famous tricksters (Jimmie Durham or James Luna) draw our attention to the Indians' destiny without showing themselves as the victims and without calling for the return to old times where everything was better. Recently, in 2010, a Polish translation of *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* by Hal Foster¹⁰ was published. In the new Polish reading in the context of the current state of culture Foster's words about parodic "trickstering" of Jimmie Durham sounded very expressive: "All

⁷ Piotrowski (2005: 268).

⁸ Piotrowski (2005: 300–301).

⁹ Piotrowski (2005: 314).

¹⁰ Foster (1996).

such strategies – a parody of primitivism, a reversal of ethnographic roles, a preemptive playing-dead, a plurality of practices – disturb a dominant culture that depends on strict stereotypes, stable lines of authority, and human reanimations and museological resurrections of many sorts.”¹¹ Such tricksters as James Luna or Jimmie Durham tell very cheerless stories – about persecutions of Indians, demeaning treatment of Mexicans and unequal treatment of people of various racial backgrounds. It is then very easy to identify with the “foreign” and to usurp the right of speaking on behalf of everyone, to assume the role of the victim and to spin unending martyrological tales that become a sadomasochistic show and, as such, strengthen the stereotypes rather than combat them. Foster, however, believes that an artist cannot undermine the existing order without undermining and lessening the importance of his own role as an artist. Otherwise, he would change into another usurpatory authority, reanimating the supposedly “humanistic values”, while in fact being patronisingly condescending like someone who falsely puts themselves in an exceptional position. The significance of Foster’s words for the Polish situation results from the tendency of Poles to write their history in the heroic-martyrological-sacrificing version. The appearance of trickster artists in the 1970s in Poland played an important role in the dismantling of the consensual cultural order between the communist authorities and progressive avant-garde environment that had been achieved in the times of Władysław Gomułka. It is the trickster artist (i.a. the above-mentioned Lachowicz, Freisler, Jurkiewicz or the KwieKulik duo) that in the times of the subsequent communist state leader Edward Gierek broke the consensual order and introduced a possibility of a pluralistic agon in the situation of a non-democratic state with its culture controlled from the above. That is why a trickster artist enters the stage of communist Poland in the time of Edward Gierek’s new deal, a time when the state finally accepts progressive art on condition that it will be autonomous and will not disturb rigid power relations. Thus, we have a real paradox on our hands: at the moment of loosening the cultural policy and opening to the world, when Poland becomes – as a common joke said – the “merriest barrack in the Communist camp”, when authorities allowed numerous experiments in the area of visual

arts, young artists regard the majority of these experiments as facilitating the gloomy compromise with the authorities, legitimising them and improving their image. Another paradox is that the Polish trickster artist of the 1970s is not an apparent oppositionist: he actually often aspires to become a member of the Polish United Workers’ Party and goes to May Day demonstrations. However, he is rejected both by the most liberal activists of the party and by the unusually powerful underground opposition that was being born at the time. In the case of a trickster, the deep division on the Polish society into “us” and “them” (the establishment) is irrelevant. Łukasz Ronduda, describing the attitude of Zdzisław Sosnowski and Ewa Partum, wrote that they used artistic discourse to blur the borders between art and pop culture, between career and prestige mechanisms in both spheres.¹²

The archetype of a trickster is connected with fundamental cultural texts. Jerzy Prokopiuk, an anthroposophist, translator and essayist, in his essay *Jahwe: demiurg-tyran czy szalony trickster? Prelude 2006–2008* [Yahweh: A demiurge-tyrant or a crazy trickster? Prelude 2006–2008]¹³ shows that God described in the Hebrew Bible plays an ingenious game with Adam and Eve – he had undoubtedly planned their fall, and the goal of the conspiracy was to banish them from the Garden of Eden and push them onto the course of progress on Earth. Yahweh in Prokopiuk’s interpretation is then someone who gave us a game called life in order to play it; God himself is actually having great fun pulling his trick, asking Adam a “pathetic” – for the Omniscient – question after Adam eats the forbidden fruit: “Where art thou?” (3,9) – and then a “naive” question “Who told thee that thou wast naked?” (3,11). If the fall had been pre-planned and the relation between God and man is described analogously to the relation between an adult and a child or a master-superior and a subject-subordinate, it is difficult to call the instance of temptation (interpreted by Prokopiuk as a relation between a paedophile and a child) a sin. It is rather the parent-God that is guilty of the sin of omission. That is why Prokopiuk views the story of Adam and Eve as an optimistic tragedy: thanks to a crazy trickster’s game mankind can finally be having fun.

¹¹ Foster (1996: 199).

¹² Ronduda (2009: 14).

¹³ Prokopiuk (2009: 230–255).

The above-mentioned trickster explanation deprives a fundamental cultural text of a clear ethical interpretation. The demiurge becomes an ambiguous unprincipled person, a disruptor of the order that he had created himself. Let us also remember that Jerzy Prokopiuk is an outstanding translator of Carl Gustav Jung – and it was the Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist who had been writing about the trickster qualities of the Old Testament Yahweh. We get to know him as a creator of meaningless destructive orgies, as someone who makes himself suffer in order to later gradually humanise himself and change into a saviour. For Jung, this change shows the compensatory relation of a trickster with a “saint”, and its expression is e.g. the medieval carnival custom with the Feast of Fools or the Feast of the Ass that blew up the established social order.¹⁴

The purpose of this book is not to reconstruct full trickster discourse, from archetypal cultural texts and characters such as the above-mentioned Yahweh of the Old Testament, Egyptian Seth¹⁵ or Greek Hermes¹⁶ to interpretations of such outstanding 20th century scholars as Claude Levi-Straus – connecting the trickster with disrupting the borders between Life and Death by the habit of eating carrion (something between the killing act of a carnivore and non-violent sustenance of a herbivore) or Sigmund Freud – connecting the figure with an unwillingness to delay immediate pleasure that leads to destroying the culture.¹⁷ Even more so, there is no space here to analyse animal categories contained in myths, e.g. Indian myths (“raven,” “coyote,” “hare,” “rabbit”¹⁸) or in interpretations of modern cultural characters such as Charlie Chaplin (“*Charlie’s trickster helped bring the immigrant population into American culture*”¹⁹) or Borat played by Sacha Baron Cohen.²⁰ There have been numerous cheats then: Odysseus who wore woman’s clothes and pretended to be dead, Biblical Jacob who did not hesitate to cheat his father Isaac on his deathbed, etc. Contrary to the background of the ancient and the Jewish tradition, Christians, especially in Poland, seem very direct and deprived of the sense

of humour. Brought up mainly in the Christian tradition, we subconsciously prefer to emphasize our sacrificing or simply kind-hearted character. Even the word *szachraj* (cheat) as opposed to *ciapa* (wimp) is of foreign etymology (most likely German). Did tricksters Wile E. Coyote and Bugs Bunny push their way in between Polish children’s characters: Marysia the unhappy orphan and the loser Miś Uszatek? Thanks to the talent of Jan Brzechwa (1898–1966) – a Polish poet of Jewish origin – some trickster features appear in the unforgettable characters of children’s tales and poems: Pchła Szachrajka, Lis Witalis or knight Szalawiła.

The memorable exhibition *Shadows of Humor – Unpleasant Business. The Czech Exhibition* [Shadows of Humor – Przykra sprawa. Czeska wystawa] showed in the BWA Gallery in Wrocław in 2006 made us realize that after the fall of Communism the Czechs placed their bets on tricksters in their art: from David Černý, Martin Zet, Kamera Skura, Guma Guar to Jirí Surůvka. “Oh! If only the Poles had as much sense of humour when it comes to religion as the Czechs do!”, sighed Iza Kowalczyk on the occasion of exhibition²¹ elsewhere describing a secretly threatening perfidious censorship strategy in Poland. The unsuccessful attempt to censor Czechs in Wrocław, Bytom and Bielsko-Biała was in fact “successful”. In Bielsko-Biała the problem concerned a pastiche of Damien Hirst’s work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* by David Černý, simply called *Shark*, in which the shark immersed in formaldehyde was a sculpture of naked Saddam Hussein. In Bytom, on the other hand, a work by Guma Guar with the Pope Benedict XVI holding Elton John’s head was censored.

The purpose of this book is rather to check how a situation of continuous and deep historical changes affected both art and art narratives; why a trickster impersonates not only an artist (as the majority of authors prove here), a curator (according to i.e. Irina Hubbard, Ewelina Kwiatkowska or Filip Pręgoski and Wojciech Ciesielski describing his own curatorial practice in the National Museum in Szczecin), but even a narrator of a story as Ewelina Jarosz shows us in her paper “*Newman: a trickster in every sense of the word!*” creating Bernadette Newone as her *alter ego*. So we would like to ask here: what do we need such a protagonist for?

¹⁴ Jung (2010: 222–224).

¹⁵ Velde (1968).

¹⁶ Kerenyi (2010).

¹⁷ Carroll (1981).

¹⁸ Radin (2010).

¹⁹ Lieberman (1994: 26).

²⁰ Kononenko&Kukharenko (2008).

²¹ Kowalczyk (2009).

What does he/she enable? What kind of forgotten, marginalized spaces does he/she bring with him/her? If we focus on emancipatory narratives, building pride and self-assurance, the answer is simple: a trickster does not wage war but, feeling uncomfortable within dominant norms, attempts to break free. Agnieszka Żechowska speaking about Aleka Polis and Małgorzata Jankowska reporting on Natalia LL reveal such an emancipatory potential in female artists' strategies of different generations. But Irina Gavrash recalling a yurodivy – a blessed fool – attracts our attention to an idiosyncratic relation with the world, a customary absence in prestigious councils and influential circles, in the academic or political world. A yurodivy has been withdrawn from any democracy – because he never is not only in the majority but not even in a “reasonable” minority. Goofy cheerfulness is allowed rather among comrades or friends, while hierarchical dependence exerts pressure to respect the status quo. Eastern artists in the West – although the Berlin Wall does not exist anymore – should rather make fun of the Eastern world, or at least give statements on their own skeletons in the cupboard. The chapter *The role of the trickster in post-communist and post-colonial countries* sheds some light on a new distribution of power which – as a patronizing one – is not quite new, in fact. The purpose of this book is, however, also a meta-theory – to reflect on art history and on the self-awareness of art historians: how to retell the images we know in a different way, and how new narratives enable us to notice something we have ignored before, e.g. the chapter *History of trickster. Urban myths and events* shows that some ancient stories can help to fulfill this aim. Classification, hierarchy, relation of power – this is for all of us who observed something extremely vivid and personal in the eye of the storm of the dismantling of the Soviet Union, and establishing a new political order in Europe. Nevertheless, also the doubts of curators (Patrycja Sikora and Piotr Stasiowski) who arranged a show on tricksters' strategies called *Swindlers, Rascals, Parasites* – described in the chapter *Curatorial performances* – cannot be omitted. Being afraid of a counterproductive and jejune effect, they disclose the frames of their activity: municipal patronage and its assumable expectations. A trickster does not offer us a universal remedy to a mere academism!

Not solving any problems, today, tricksters however add fuel to the flames when they participate in

various contemporary hot debates. Oskar Dawicki commented upon the commercialization of young art as well as humanistic, pompous predilection of the artists for splendid subjects. Dawicki's performance on the last European Culture Congress in 2011 (Wrocław) referred to the alienation of cultural policy from the needs of society and maintaining a peculiar caste of art officials who, financed by tax-payers' money, lead a pleasant, untroubled life of arbiters elegantiarum. During the deliberations of the Congress, Dawicki offered some refined refreshments that put the participants to the test of good taste – beautiful-looking biscuits tasted of burnt bread and the toast for the success of the Congress was raised with bacon-flavoured vodka. He ridiculed the attachment to the national alcohol tradition and created a two-in-one product, a vodka with a snack – a drink that simply stank. “For me, garlic with chocolate tastes subversively,” explained the artist with a smile, glad of the fact that the taste of garlic only appears after some time and the bon appétit toast seemed to have been much too early. If we combine the curatorial activities of the Culture Congress in Wrocław with the idea of relational aesthetics and a wish to differ from the “bureaucracy-encumbered collection-based museums”, we will certainly see a desire to create “a buzz of creativity and the aura of being at the vanguard of contemporary production” – as Claire Bishop wrote about curators promoting “laboratory” paradigm (Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barbara van der Linden, Hou Hanru, Nicolas Bourriaud).²² Bishop sarcastically notes that project-based works-in-progress and artists-in-residence begin to conform with an “experience economy”: “the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experience,”²³ more than that – this experience is “essentially institutionalized.” Such in-depth analyses of Polish art do not as yet appear in Poland – that perhaps results from the fact that capitalism, since the fall of the old communist system in 1989, is still something new, the ethos of an “independent” artist following a strong modernist tradition is still something obvious and the joy that Polish artists achieve international successes measured by sales prices is still huge, also with the Polish left. In Krakow, after Oskar Dawicki moved to Warsaw, the main role of the trickster of

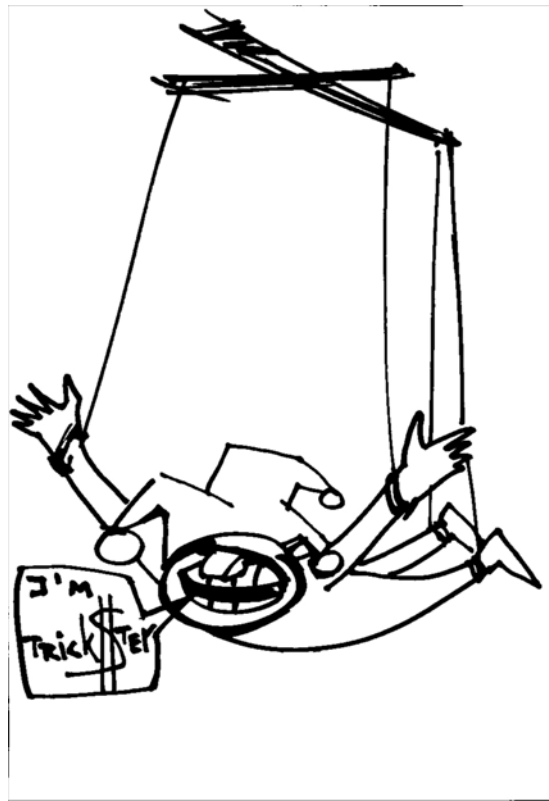
²² Bishop (2004: 52).

²³ Bishop (2004: 52).



Ill. 4. Logo of the conference *Trickster Strategies in the Artists' and Curatorial Practice*, organised in the Institute of Art History of the University of Wrocław in October 2011

the royal city was assumed by Janek Simon. Some time ago, in the Entropia gallery in Wrocław I saw his unforgettable film *Departure* [Odłot] about Krakow churches setting off into space – the film first showed a beautiful panorama of the city, a contemplation of which was interrupted by successive holy buildings unexpectedly launched into space. Whether they started out to get closer to the boss or left the sinful society that they did not want to harbour any longer – we will never know. The cityscape that was left was definitely different... However, Simon's trickster character is not only visible in his works but also in his lifestyle and the way of making a living, both of which mock the horizons of the Polish middle class. Such mockery was also known to a Swiss curator Harald Szeemann who died in 2005. When Szeemann created a mischievous exhibition for the Zachęta Gallery centenary (2001) in Warsaw, serious critics maintained that the artist did not want to invoke any provocation. Furthermore, there were also those who considered Maurizio Cattelan (author of the exhibited sculpture) as an artist concerned with humanistic and religious values. It was really difficult not to admit that the rightist critic Jan Michalski who ridiculed the hypocrisy of prominent art historians that in Cattelan's sculpture saw "a Pope suffering under a cross as Jesus did on His Way of the Cross. The meteorite crushing the figure of the Pope can be treated as a symbol of evil."²⁴ was right only so the



Ill. 5. The Krasnals, *Untitled*, the drawing sent to the organizers of the the international conference *Trickster Strategies in the Artists' and Curatorial Practice*

discussion about the meanders of national Catholic tradition would not happen.

The figure of the trickster efficiently unveils hypocrisy. In Russia, they mock of the role of the artist from the East without being ashamed of attacking the public, as, for example, Oleg Kulik does. Fortunately, Kulik's exhibition in Warsaw in 2000 where the artist showed a family of the future" did not occasion any indignant reactions. It was quite surprising because the list of censored works and exhibitions in Poland after the fall of communism

²⁴ Michalski (2001), see also Michalski, Jan: "Po aferach w Zachęcie" (After scandals in Zachęta gallery), *Znak*, 2001, kwiecień, http://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/punkty_551.html, viewed on 2 March 2012

is quite long (it can be viewed on the Indeks 73 website, http://www.indeks73.pl/en_index.php). It is, undoubtedly, the legacy of the old system and a very bad practice in a country where nowadays one can be sentenced for the enigmatic “insult of religious feelings” (which used to be “undermining the leading role of the party”), often treated as a value superior to freedom of speech. That is why I raised the topic *Trickster Strategies in the Artists’ and Curatorial Practice* when organising the international conference in the Institute of Art History of the University of Wrocław (October 26–27, 2011, [ill. 4](#)). Above all I undertook an attempt to diagnose the context for using trickster strategies by artists from Central and Eastern Europe after over two decades after the fall of the old regime. On the occasion of the conference the following statement was sent to the organisers (I was supported by Ph.D. students: Ewelina Kwiatkowska and Magdalena Zięba) by the still anonymous The Krasnals group ([ill. 5](#)):

“Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the communist era ended and the times of politically correct literalness came a trickster – against what leading critics and curators claim – is NO LONGER a contesting artist, one who fights guerrilla warfare lined with humour that exposes the hypocrisy and shallowness of the governing elites. A trickster is a “creator” who, commissioned by a curator, carries out a public-funded project that is supposed to imitate the fascinating mythology of tricksters.

Instead of understanding it themselves and especially, in keeping with ethics, making the public understand – curators do something opposite. They do their best to sell this product that is spoiled by definition, with its faulty workmanship and erroneous construction in a packaging that is inadequate to its content.

The concept of a TRICKSTER introduced to the European Culture Congress in Wrocław is preposterous: at the very least because of the reference to the leading tricksters of Polish art – the Orange Alternative – while denying them participation in the Congress at the same time! Instead of that some commissioned junk by performers as distant from the idea of a trickster as Masłowska or Bałka was thrown into the ‘trickster’ pot.

The friendly media and art world will sing praises to this junk for some time, trying not to notice

that parallelly, in true trickster spirit – as a sign of disagreement with what is happening in culture and politics – the Orange Alternative and The Krasnals conducted COMMON TASK, an ironic happening within their alternative Frickster programme. But what can The Krasnals, a group that was the first in history to be awarded the Orange Dwarf by Major Fydrych, possibly have in common with tricksters? Actually, nothing – at least with the modern meaning of this phrase! Thank God! It is Frickster, not the Trickster that today effectively exposes hypocrisy, pricks the balloon of grandiosity and shouts loudly that the emperor is naked.

Currently The Krasnals are the most expressive group of artists working in the spirit of a frickster but at the same time, unfortunately, the only one actively contesting environment in the field of art in Poland. We do not know what that results from – perhaps from the prevailing spirit of conformism that modern artists so easily fall for. People who can do something on their own, not relying on external support can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The majority of grand or small personages will not lift a hand without the guarantee of financial support and an assurance of promotion. We, as The Krasnals, have got a different approach and proudly join the frickster tradition of the Orange Alternative. Their orange dwarves overturned the communism. But, as it turns out, the friendly arrangements of that time have not died out and art today once again is boiled down to a tool of political propaganda. The Krasnals group fights it now, a group that tries to break up the cartel that holds the power over the art market. We do it as our predecessors did – through absurd and joke. We are against fossilized arrangements shaping Polish art! We demand depoliticization of art! We demand that the political whore of Krytyka Polityczna deal with politics and not art! It is high time for the beast in the shape of the Wawel dragon calling for sacrifices and tributes to burst with a loud bang! We want politics to be on the agenda of the government, not in the museums, galleries or on the art market! We demand transferring the 1% of taxes to agriculture (at least we’ll have something to eat), not art! We want art to be free for Dwarves of all kinds!”

Unfortunately, the above manifesto of “freaksterism” has turned out to be only self-advertising activity because The Krasnals since recently have been vigorously adhering to right-wing politics be-

traying their previous in-between status. What is even more astounding, they seem to dream about strong authority and prestige, unveiling jealousy and gall. And trickster is not a green-eyed monster!

The trickster, as an ambivalent persona, not locating itself beyond the analyzed system, makes us aware of its functioning, its spreading of prejudices and of its value systems. I previously thought that thanks to i.a. The Krasnals – as women also are members of the anonymous group – Ewa Tonik's thesis from her book *Olbrzymki* [She-Giants] (2008) that in the free post-1989 Poland women artists duplicate the worst stereotypes about female masochism and victimization is becoming out-of-date. But sado-masochism still seems to be the paramount tradition here, not so many years after our quasi-communism was dismantled. Unfortunately, a trickster in Poland is still above all a masculine figure; what is more, it is one accused of cynicism and immorality, while in fact, besides being a fascinating and elusive shape-shifter permanently on the road, thanks to his unsettledness it has a skill to wake the longing for freedom.

Wrocław, December 2012

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History of Trickster. Urban Myths and Events

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Trickster – mythical deity, archetype and figure of a creator

Foreword

Trickster – a colloquial expression, a psychological term, i.e. a Jungian archetype, and an anthropological term denoting a mythical figure – has come to light in art studies, in particular studies of contemporary art, comparatively recently, especially in Poland.¹ The English word *trickster* does not even appear in the Dictionary of Foreign Terms and several years ago a tradition was born to use the Polonized form of the capitalized English term *Trickster*.² I will adopt this term as well, especially since such a popular English online dictionary as *The Free Dictionary* gives the meanings of the word *trickster* and the term *Trickster* separately.

The accumulation of negative meanings in the word *trickster* used as a metaphorical definition of an artist may be surprising as they also correspond with a negative stereotype of a creator, rightly or wrongly called avant-garde. *Ling.pl*, for instance, an English-Polish online dictionary, denotes *trickster* as a fraud, cheat, humbug and deceiver, or otherwise *swindler*, i.e., as the definition continues, a fraud, crook, fiddler, impostor, deceiver, schemer

and quack, or *magician* – a wizard, conjurer, sorcerer, enchanter, miracle worker and illusionist.

In the sense of the psychological term or a Jungian archetype, however, *Trickster* refers to an artist as much as to any other personification of this archetype – from the Indian Coyote, through American Brer Rabbit to Swedish Pippi Longstocking (incidentally, the embodiment of the counter-norm of a girl's behaviour in a patriarchal society). It comes as no surprise then that an artist, both an avant-garde or a contemporary one, may personify the archetype of the Trickster as well. What could be surprising, however, is that this information is difficult to confirm even though the anthropological term Trickster dates back to the second half of the 19th century.³ Yet, we are dealing with a universal figure – one that, as e.g. Paul Radin points out,⁴ in the archaic period as well as in the ancient times appears in the Indian cultures along with those of ancient Greece, China, Japan and Semites. It was also identified in the Islamic culture as Juha and Nasreddin.⁵

¹ The conference *Trickster Strategies in the Artists' and Curatorial Practice*, the Institute of Art History, University of Wrocław (October 26–27, 2011). Its agenda is available at: <http://oposite.uni.wroc.pl>, viewed on 16 February 2012.

² *ALBO – albo* 4/1998–1–4/1999.

³ Sieradzian (2005: 95) says that when he tried to verify it in three given sources, the two that he had access to did not contain any information about it.

⁴ Radin (1972).

⁵ Machut-Mendecka (1998–1999: 97) and Machut-Mendecka (2003).

Ambivalence, subversion and transgression of the Trickster

The archetype and the mythical figure of the Trickster, though also or strictly a person called trickster, is mentioned not only by art scholars and researchers of exhibition curatorship, but also by artists and curators themselves.⁶ Hence, a basic question arises: What does Trickster/trickster let them see, elicit or emphasise in the artistic and curatorial practices that would otherwise be difficult or almost impossible to grasp? Perhaps for some time we simply have been dealing with trickster strategies or behaviour tactics that had been consciously adopted by artists and curators and, thus, easily identifiable as such? Is it then about reinterpreting well-known practices or rather about interpreting some comparatively new phenomena? Undoubtedly, an initial survey of the situation in art and curatorship leads to the conclusion that both are involved: the term *Trickster*, as well as the word *trickster*, above all show the changes that occurred in the understanding of art (and curatorship) since the emergence, as it is believed, of postmodernism in the 1960s,⁷ taking into account the precedents of the latter in earlier art, especially some of artistic phenomena of the first decades of the previous century that are usually associated with modernism.

What kind of features then mark the mythical Trickster that psychology treats as the oldest or the most original embodiment of the Jungian arche-

type? The *World Mythology*⁸ entry defines him as a god that, in keeping with his name, eagerly plays tricks on other gods and occasionally on people and animals. As perhaps the best definition of this figure it considers the one offered by Lewis Hyde who characterises the Trickster as a being that transgresses social and physical boundaries and sets them at the same time, e.g. between the Earth and the sky where he carries gods whose messenger he sometimes is; as someone who often travels, assumes e.g. an animal shape, looks for new goods and instruments of culture and creates the world; breaks down the norms accepted by community and destroys or blurs the difference between what is “good and bad, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead.”⁹ Moreover, it quotes the features that the Trickster was given by David Leeming,¹⁰ i.e. excessive sexual activity, irresponsibility and amorality. In connection with the first feature, the entry refers to Hyde’s definition of the Trickster as a creative liar, since, thanks to being one, he satisfies his sexual desire and finds food. Leeming shows Trickster to fall prey to his own tricks, to be uncouth and immature in his own creativity, often appearing as a sly but stupid animal in hunting cultures, e.g. he features as a coyote or a raven in Native American myths. Ultimately, the Trickster is paradoxically defined by Paul Radin as a “wise fool” appearing in sacral context and sharing certain features with supreme gods.¹¹???

In a different characteristic of the mythical Trickster attention is drawn, too, to his so-called heightened corporeality, extraordinary appetite and uninhibited sexuality; his personality is defined as infantile, still unformed, unreasonable, antisocial, egoistic, driven solely by urges, oblivious to social norms and ethical responsibilities. It calls the Trickster an illegitimate antagonist of a supreme deity, a low-rank associate or a competitor of a creator, a younger and worse brother of a positive cultural hero, and, because of that, a comical figure.¹²

Bearing in mind the two above-mentioned characteristics showing the mythical Trickster as a grotesque, unstable and ambivalent being oscillating between contradictions, a different lapidary definition of this god may be deemed as accurate as

⁶ This issue was a crucial element of the programme of the above-mentioned conference. Examples of artists’ opinions about the role of the trickster/Trickster are given in later parts of the article.

⁷ E.g. Walter Benn Michaels (2011). My review of his book: Stokłosa (2012: 132–138). I understand postmodernism very broadly, as going beyond modernism in different directions, similarly as poststructuralism is going beyond structuralism in different directions. I treat postmodernism and poststructuralism as corresponding “postsystems” united, among other things, by deconstruction of binary and hierarchical oppositions. Thus I don’t reduce these “postsystems” to textuality and constructivism, but I include in them also materialism (for example, materialist ontology of Gilles Deleuze, the ANT of Bruno Latour, as based on Deleuze’s concept of the rhizome, and material threads in philosophy of Michel Foucault). What is more, one should emphasize, Deleuze and Foucault had deconstructed opposition: essentialism versus constructivism, so important in various postmodernist/poststructuralist discussions since 1980. Simultaneously I treat, for example, Latour’s deconstruction of modernist hierarchical opposition: culture versus nature, as well as his ANT, as a positive program in relation to strong negativism in postmodernism/poststructuralism.

⁸ *World Mythology* ENG 204.

⁹ Hyde (1998: 7).

¹⁰ Leeming (1990).

¹¹ Radin (1972).

¹² Wasilewski (2002: 162–163).

that of Radin's – an "exponent of all possibilities"¹³ and someone who is neither one or the other but both one and the other,¹⁴ because they point to his uncertainty, to use the quantum physics term, and at the same time to his creative potential, subversion and transgression. E.g. Hermes "belongs neither to Olympus nor Earth, avoids conflict, has no belligerence yet wins, looks for understanding with everyone – from the inhabitants of heavens to the dark creatures of the underworld. One of his sons was Hermaphroditus with male as well as female features."¹⁵

In other words, the mythical Trickster may be said to be present wherever a boundary lies – in order to cross it, eradicate, move or simply draw it – and that is why he is called "the god of the threshold"¹⁶.

As can be supposed, in no myth or scholarly approach is Trickster a unanimous character. This lack of unanimity is briefly summarised by Radin who draws our attention to the fact that already in its earliest and most archaic form discovered in the myths of North American Indians this being is "at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself."¹⁷ He is characterised by eternal duality (and even triplicity – as he often combines godlike, human and animal features).¹⁸

In connection with the above-mentioned traits of the mythical Trickster, a question arises whether they compose a possibly complete picture and whether in the various primitive and ancient cultures it is really the same character. Or are we perhaps dealing with a number of characters that are not identical in every significant respect, that, besides, have evolved and changed along with their respective cultures? On the one hand, scholars draw attention to the lack of a satisfactory comprehensive grasp of the mythical Trickster in cultural anthropology,¹⁹ and on the other – to highlighting the internal contradictions of this figure that usually combines different approaches.²⁰ At the same time, they emphasise the similarities that occur

among the manifestations of the Trickster in the mythologies of different cultures and the complexity of this figure.

For example, the Yoruba deity Eshu Elegbara is considered to be perhaps the most refined among other manifestations of the mythical Trickster and is called not only a messenger of destiny and provider of information from gods to gods and from gods to people, but also a linguist and an intelligent metaphysician. Of European pagan deities, Hermes is claimed to be one that reminds him the most: whimsicality, agility and the nimbleness of both the mind and the body are mentioned as features common to both of these gods.²¹

As mentioned above, the mythical Trickster treated in psychology as a form of a manifestation of the Jungian archetype in ancient cultures is the oldest reflection of the inner contradiction or duality indicated in this archetype. As one of scholars put it, it is all about a cultural archetype filled with meaning by a given civilization, meaning shaped by the archetype of the Shadow and – for positive compensation – in parallel with the archetype of the Wise Old Man as well as by "a person as a model aspect of group awareness."²² Thus, Jung recognized the features of the Trickster also in the medieval image of a devil, in medieval feasts of fools and madmen, in witches' Sabbaths, in Rabelais' characters, in the alchemic Mercury, Tom Thumb, Grimm Brothers' Hans, Hanswurst the buffoon, Pulcinella, clown etc., as a different scholar emphasises.²³ Even the folklore St. Peter and the devil as a parody of the Creator are both manifestations of the archetype of the Trickster.²⁴ On the basis of Jung's theory different incarnations of the archetype of the Trickster, in all their complexity and ambiguity, occur as something perfectly natural in each culture.

What is equally significant as far as the play that interests me here is concerned, one of the means of their action is provocation, and the main means of expression are "theatre, game, paradox, metaphor."²⁵ Generally, psychoanalysis and depth psychology treat the archetypal Trickster as an "important cultural 'release valve'. He represents the 'return of the repressed', the Dionysian aspects of life only temporarily held in abeyance by the

¹³ Toelken (1969).

¹⁴ Ramsey (1983).

¹⁵ Mendecki (1998–1999: 135).

¹⁶ Hyde (2008: 8).

¹⁷ Radin (1972: 22–23).

¹⁸ Pelton (1980: 505), Sieradzan (2005: 96).

¹⁹ Wasilewski (2002: 162).

²⁰ Sieradzan (2005: 95–96).

²¹ Davis (1991).

²² Dudek (1998–1999: 10).

²³ Sieradzan (2005: 96).

²⁴ Wasilewski (2002: 159).

²⁵ Dudek (1998–1999: 30).

Apollonian forces of civilization.”²⁶ It can then be said that in every culture, and thus in its respective art, the archetypal Trickster performs an important compensatory function as an agent removing the existing stagnation and, at the same time, restoring the balance disturbed by the “Apollonian forces”. In terms of art, it is also important that on the basis of Jung’s theory the “comedian, joker, jester, satirist, eccentric artist, street or film actor, announcer, presenter, master of public, sacred or profane ceremonies” corresponds with “lower” figures of the Trickster in the role that he plays, and e.g. Jesus – a messenger from God to people – represents this archetype at the deepest spiritual level.²⁷

What is more, it is from the mythical Trickster that researchers develop other culturally important figures. He is, e.g. believed to be the predecessor of a jester and a picaresque hero of Western picaresque novels,²⁸ and the latter – a homeless vagabond – is treated almost as an assimilation of the Trickster. It is the jester, especially the medieval one, that displays numerous features of the mythical Trickster whose expression until today can be found in Kasper Theatre and a clown,²⁹ including the circus clown.³⁰ It can also be seen in the case of Till Eulenspiegel.³¹ Some see their presence in theatre plays for adults and, depending on the terminology, in the 20th century, contemporary or avant-garde theatre, e.g. in Tadeusz Kantor’s theatre. Strictly speaking, “in Kantor’s theatrical grotesque, just as in Meyerhold’s grotesque – both relating to a market stall of jesters and comedians of old – an incredible trickster drive for showing off and the action itself can be recognized,” claims an anthropologist who is besides convinced of the “contemporary action of the mythologem of the Trickster and a creative development of the narrative-spectacle paradigm,”³² e.g. in opera or burlesque.

Figures that are, so to speak, trickster in spirit include various literary characters, e.g. Švejk from Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk* (that also displays features of a picaresque hero³³) and a character of *Gargling with Tar* (*Kloktat*

debet)³⁴, a novel by Jáchym Topol, a writer who is, incidentally, considered a postmodernist, as well as other writers and poets, some of which as significant as e.g. Allen Ginsberg.³⁵ Generally, the presence of a trickster spirit character is present both in European American as well as in African American literature³⁶ where in the period of slavery it enabled black people to tell stories about themselves and take their revenge for the humiliation inflicted on them by outsmarting their white employers.³⁷ This figure became the subject of a comparative analysis of William Blake’s *Book of Job*, *Modern Times* by Charles Chaplin and Tricky’s *Strugglin’* and *Black Steel* as – respectively – a romantic work of art, a modernist film, and postmodernist songs.³⁸ Moreover, despite all their differences, some other examples of this kind of figure include Tyler Durden from *Fight Club* by David Fincher (1999), Jack Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* by Gore Verbinski (2003) and, on the other hand, Ferris Bueller as the one who uses no violence from *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* by John Hughes (1986). It is believed that these three film characters encourage us to reject the ideals and accept ourselves as we are, with our flaws and imperfections as unique individuals.³⁹ One of scholars has even identified Jan Kott, an outstanding literary and theatre critic, as a trickster figure,⁴⁰ while others, as I mentioned in the beginning of the article, considered some exhibition curators and, of course, various artists from America through Europe⁴¹ to China⁴² and South Africa⁴³ to be tricksters as well.

Trickster as figure of an artist, postmodernist creator and network society

As one artist believes, there is space for a Trickster only in a rigid system, i.e. one deprived of blurry borders.⁴⁴ Another artist claims that an artist as an embodiment of a Trickster ridicules selected cul-

²⁶ Mizrach (n.d.).

²⁷ Dudek (1998–1999: 13).

²⁸ Engelking (2008).

²⁹ Radin (1972).

³⁰ Józwiak (1998–1999: 65–66).

³¹ Sznajderman (2000: 27).

³² Kolankiewicz (2010: 249).

³³ Engelking (2008).

³⁴ Engelking (2008).

³⁵ Hyde (2008: 275).

³⁶ Hyde (2008).

³⁷ Harris (n.d.).

³⁸ Fairclough (2005).

³⁹ Wa – Conner (n.d.).

⁴⁰ Borkowska (2003).

⁴¹ Hyde (2008).

⁴² Fleck (n.d.).

⁴³ Panchia (n.d.).

⁴⁴ Angel (n.d.).

tural aspects, and “from art’s self-analytic perspective, new art parodies the old.”⁴⁵ What is important, he treats parody as a deconstructive strategy and assigns it both to modernist art as underlying it since the very beginning (from Édouard Manet) and to postmodernist art whose methodology is, according to him, defined by different strategies of deconstruction.⁴⁶

In my opinion, the sublime image of the mythical Trickster is entitled to be treated as an image of an artist and a postmodernist author – the former is supported by the huge creative potential of the figure and the latter is additionally strengthened by the above-mentioned inner contradiction or the eternal duality of a being constantly transgressing some borders, as an intermediary always retaining something of the duality that it has to overcome.⁴⁷ For example, the mythical Legba can always balance contradictory aspects and “dances not only to the beat of a different drummer, but to the beats of many different drummers at the same time.”⁴⁸ The Trickster can be treated like that because he strives to overcome the opposition (binary and hierarchical) and creates new situations, in fact, as I mentioned above, participates in the creation of the world, although at the same time “this figure in many mythologies of creation is responsible [...] for the coming into existence of ‘the world as is’ instead of ‘the world that should be’ [...]. It is the Coyote, Raven, Spider, Hare and other trickster animals from American and African mythologies that introduce death, diseases, difficulties in finding food to the ideal world [...]. Trickster is the Devil spoiling the world [...] and the cunning Prometheus all in one.”⁴⁹ For instance, Legba is like – *a posteriori* – a deity of the 20th century chaos theory. “But it is only in risking such chaos that novelty is continually reborn,” and Eshu has access to *ashé*, “the immanent power of creation,”⁵⁰ provided by a supreme god. “Eshu can transform the past into ‘novel utterances’ [...], and Eshu/Legba puts creative chaos in the heart of tradition,” as Davis notes.⁵¹

What is more, Eshu as “the being of the network, of the immanent language of connection”⁵² can also serve as a figure of a network model of social relationships shaped by the Internet. The *orisha* deities that Legba belongs to have made it even to cyberspace in a science fiction novel *Count Zero* by William Gibson, who, in the interview with Davis, stated that “the original African religious impulse really lends itself much more to a computer world than anything in Western religion.”⁵³

It is then obvious that different researchers directly and indirectly connect the mythical Trickster also or in particular with postmodernism, offering a new interpretation of this figure in the light of the post-Enlightenment philosophy as opposed to one that has been the most frequent so far, i.e. acknowledging the Enlightenment conceptions of Truth, evolution and devolution.⁵⁴ Post-structuralist ethnographer Gerald Vizenor simply states that Trickster “is postmodern,”⁵⁵ that the first postmodernists were Indian storytellers since in oral tradition people intensely reacted to contextualised knowledge. Written culture, however, aspires to decontextualise knowledge by creating timeless truths independent of the context. At the same time, the reader-response theory that originated in the postmodern theory of literature maintains that all texts have contexts, even those aspiring to be as unbiased as possible, and that context consists of various elements.⁵⁶ Other scholars also notice the similarity between oral tradition and postmodern contextualism and claim that if postmodernism has turned on modernism, and pre-modern traditional cultures have utilised nothing of the latter, then the contrasts and similarities between postmodernism and oral lore should provide interesting insight into both of these spheres.⁵⁷

Generally, interpretations of the mythical Trickster in postmodernist categories are connected with literary works of Vizenor, noting the fact that “in their playfulness, manipulation of language, and truth-eluding ambiguity, tricksters have often been held to embody [...] many of the same characteristics as postmodernism.” At the same time a possible description of the postmodern Trickster is ascribed

⁴⁵ Cronk (1996).

⁴⁶ Cronk (1996).

⁴⁷ Levy-Strauss (1970: 309).

⁴⁸ Davis (1998–1999: 50).

⁴⁹ Wasilewski (2002: 162).

⁵⁰ Davis (1991).

⁵¹ Davis (1991).

⁵² Davis (1991).

⁵³ Davis (1991).

⁵⁴ Cheney (n.d.).

⁵⁵ Vizenor (1990: 281).

⁵⁶ Vizenor, in: McCaffery and Marshall (1993: 53).

⁵⁷ Cheney (n.d.).

to Hyde as the scholar states: “With some polytropic characters, it is possible that there is no real self behind the shifting masks, or that the real self lies exactly there, in the moving surfaces and not beneath.”⁵⁸

On the one hand then it is emphasised that the figure of the Trickster breathes life into postmodernist discourse,⁵⁹ on the other hand, however, the differences between postmodernism and the cultures of indigenous American peoples are pointed out. “Postmodernism (at least in its most influential forms) and indigenous cultures escape modernism’s fixation on the One Truth in related but ultimately very different ways. While for postmodernism ‘It’s words all the way down’ and ‘truth’ (now in small letters and scare quotes) is ‘negotiated,’ for indigenous peoples issues of truth don’t arise in the same metaphysical way they do in the West (whether postmodern *or* modern) because for indigenous peoples ‘It’s world [not words – BS] all the way up.’ Whereas for postmodernism ‘truth’ is a matter of social construction and negotiation, for indigenous peoples truth (or the multifaceted faces of reality) is *revealed*—the world from time to time reveals yet another of its many dimensions. [...] While for indigenous peoples the world unfolds in multiple masks, for a postmodernist such as Richard Rorty this unfolding is reduced to multiple ‘conversations of mankind.’”⁶⁰

From the perspective of European (European American) culture that was shaped by ancient Greek and Hebrew thought, similarities noticed between tricksterism, to coin an *ad hoc* phrase, and postmodernism may seem as a testimony to the regression of this culture to a more primitive state. If we consider Plato’s *Republic* and the Bible as some of the most important and foundational works for this culture, then in the former the duality and ambivalence of tricksterism is negated by the perfect harmony of the divine and the human as well as by the lack of evil which was eradicated after rejecting the idea of God as a creator of evil, while in the latter, to take the Book of Job as an example, the injustice of the world is accepted.⁶¹

Of key importance, considering the subject of this part of the article, is that the Book of Job con-

tains “a glimpse of the image of God as a trickster, that is to say, of the principle of ambivalence, of the relationship between god and evil, perhaps even of their personification.”⁶² Diamond calls it “the primitive sub-stratum in the consciousness of Job”⁶³ who ultimately withdraws from perceiving God as Trickster. Meanwhile, it may be assumed that postmodernism, post-structuralism and deconstruction bring back the figure of the mythical Trickster to our culture whether they want it or not (although in such characters as Hermes and Prometheus he has always belonged to its ancient Greek legacy), and free it, at least in a certain way of thinking, from “moral fanaticism, based as it is on abstract notions of pure good, pure evil and the exclusive moral possibility or fate of any particular individual [...] [which – BS] is absent among primitive people.”⁶⁴

Example of Allen Ginsberg,
Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp
and John Cage

Hyde along with other scholars provides some interesting examples of interpreting artistic attitudes of selected authors in the spirit of tricksterism, and implicitly in the categories of postmodernism, post-structuralism and deconstruction.⁶⁵ It is necessary to note here though that Hyde sees only a certain coincidence between artistic practices and the myth of the Trickster and juxtaposes “the trickster stories up against specific cases of the imagination in action, hoping that each might illuminate the other.”⁶⁶ What he means, which is significant for considering tricksterism, is imagination uprooting the existing order that has survived in new forms,⁶⁷ which he expects to find exactly in creativity, in art, music and literature.⁶⁸ In the subtitle of his book he

⁶² Diamond (1972: 79).

⁶³ Diamond (1972: 79).

⁶⁴ Diamond (1972: 81).

⁶⁵ Fairclough (2005).

⁶⁶ Hyde (2008: 14).

⁶⁷ Hyde (2008: 13).

⁶⁸ The role of the imagination of the Trickster is emphasised by other scholars, too, e.g. Vizenor (1993) and Fairclough (2005). The latter, following the psychological and anthropological research into myths considers the Trickster to be a personification of the playfulness of imagination that subversively manifests itself in the myth and the archetype and conceals the recurrent universal and transpersonal motif.

⁵⁸ Lock (2002), Hyde (2008: 54).

⁵⁹ Smith (1997).

⁶⁰ Cheney (n.d.).

⁶¹ Diamond (1972).

emphasises the culture-building role of the imagination that has been thus directed.⁶⁹

Discussing, e.g. the line *America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel* that ends Ginsberg's poem *America*, Hyde emphasises the poet's reconciliation of his inner contradiction or the duality of his attitude: "This voice does not oppose 'America' and does not oppose 'queer', but settles directly in the joint. It is the utterances of a patriot/ex-patriot, an insider/outsider who doesn't want to get caught at either pole. This balancing act was part of Ginsberg's talent, appeal, and art. In politics he managed to be one of the few modern artists to unsettle Communists and capitalists alike."⁷⁰

As far as Picasso, Duchamp and Cage are concerned, Hyde presents how they used coincidence in their art, thanks to which, as may be said, in the acts of subversion and transgression they crossed the contemporary borders of art and overthrew various binary and hierarchical oppositions. He draws attention to Picasso's conviction that on the level of the artist's subconsciousness in the work of art nothing is by accident as accidents accompany only spontaneous or impulsive reactions. He notes that in this aspect Picasso is Freudian or Jungian and emphasises the universality of the idea that accidents that happen to us reveal our hidden purpose or behavioural pattern.⁷¹ He gives the example of Picasso's sculpture *Bull's Head* that is composed of a bicycle saddle and a handlebar found in a rubbish dump exactly thanks to the subconscious association of these parts with the creature,⁷² which to some extent illustrates Picasso's words: "I do not seek, I find."⁷³ In Hyde's opinion, this approach is typical of many artists of the 20th century.

Speaking about Duchamp, the scholar reminds that his art, originating from Dadaism and Surrealism, by its definition referred to coincidence as it was all about liberation from manual activities, repeating obligatory conventions, one's own perception habits, the acquired taste and the principle of causality. He regards this kind of art as the same source of joy as a tortoise that the little Hermes discovered, the joy of being free of what is known and

looking at the world with a fresh eye.⁷⁴ He emphasises that it mattered to Duchamp that he was not responsible for the intention behind making the object that he introduced to art as a ready-made. Because of that, in his opinion, the artist found himself at the crossroads, clashing the usually separate things and appropriating common articles for art, thus becoming "Eshu in the marketplace, Eshu at the crossroads, Eshu at the gates."⁷⁵

An interesting analogy can be found between Duchamp as the author of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* and the above-mentioned Hermes. He interprets the bride, a category situated between being a virgin and a wife, that in the above work is symbolised by a panel of glass resting on another panel of glass that stands for the bachelors as a representation of sexual arousal deprived of sexual consummation, and the artist who in this work introduces the balance between desire and sexual fantasy is compared to "Hermes hungry for meat, but not eating."⁷⁶

Considering Cage's works, however, Hyde deems his approach to coincidence as equivalent to that of Duchamp's who resigned from using manual techniques in his art and as different from that of Picasso's because Picasso explored his ego. Meanwhile, Cage is known to have used coincidence as a creative method simultaneously excluding improvisation, spontaneity and automatic art and using a toss of a coin and the *I Ching* book, ruling out the ego from the creative process in opposition to Picasso. In connection with disrupting the existing order in art and questioning the contemporary artistic tradition by using his trickster actions, Picasso is believed to be the one who undermined the difference between truth and lie in art by claiming that "Art is the lie that tells the truth," the scholar explains.⁷⁷

It can then seem obvious that in art the archetypal personification of the Trickster is assigned the function of stirring up "turbulence" and leading to fundamental change, e.g. to creating a new style that is indefinitely replaced with a new one because this figure is treated as a vital aspect for the continuous renewal of the system.⁷⁸ The mythical Trickster can be a role model here because it is

⁶⁹ Taking this into account, numerous proposals of new media art in Poland and in the world can be reinterpreted in trickster categories.

⁷⁰ Hyde (2008: 275).

⁷¹ Hyde (2008: 136).

⁷² Hyde (2008: 146).

⁷³ Hyde (2008: 128).

⁷⁴ Hyde (2008: 123).

⁷⁵ Hyde (2008: 124).

⁷⁶ Hyde (2008: 305–306).

⁷⁷ Hyde (2008: 13).

⁷⁸ Kazmierczak (2001: 143–151).

thanks to his certain behaviour, e.g. Legba's, that "the community is imagined to interact dynamically, rather than by some rigid structure."⁷⁹ That is why this figure is believed to be necessary for keeping the system healthy and is treated as the oldest expression of "negative feedback."⁸⁰ The existence of figures "whose function is to reveal and disrupt all that the culture is built on"⁸¹ in different cultures is deemed necessary for their correct functioning.

Regarding the above, it may seem interesting that e.g. in China the authorities and official media have been denoting all the unruly artists that are discriminated and treated as a threat to the ideological monopoly of the communist party as "tricksters" – a name that is supposed to be offensive, identifying and stigmatising. Thus, the authorities themselves recognise their art as subversive against the Chinese political system although it concerns the artists who have emigrated to the West. One way or the other, like genuine Tricksters they "introduced uncertainty, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and chance into the making and communication of art and ideas. [...] and redrew the boundaries of modern Chinese culture to encompass other languages, symbols, people, concepts, and technology."⁸² These artists include, among others, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Song Dong and Huang Yong Ping who have become intermediaries between China and the West.

The archetype of the Trickster manifests itself in the postcolonial art of South Africa in yet a different way. Although during the colonialism period the rhetoric of resistance was considered dominant in the work of South African artists, and the postcolonial time saw the rise of grotesque and spectacularity, after the overturning of apartheid it was humour and amusement that started to play a bigger role. Nowadays, in the works of the local artists, e.g. Robin Rhode, the archetype of the Trickster depicts him as someone who crosses the borders, a manipulator and a marginal figure that by its presence disrupts the existing order in order to reveal the fraud and overthrow the status quo. Robin Rhode is treated like someone who, using humour, subverts the division into the centre and peripheries and in democratic South Africa deals with the marginal figure.⁸³

The function of the archetypal Trickster in the modern world seems to be very important. One of the authors even says that in our urbanised societies where individuals usually live in large groups "tricksters have come to represent the yearnings of those who wish to regain their individualism, liberty and freedom. [...] by engaging in ploys that outwit political powers, overcome financial needs, and luxuriate in the freedom and liberty of an adventurous, self-realized individualistic lifestyle."⁸⁴ In turn Hyde discovers them in America in the creation of a swindler in film or literature that is sometimes believed to be an undercover American hero and numbered among the unofficial founding fathers of the country. If America is understood as a land of uprooted wanderers and free market, a melting pot, a shameless country in which anyone can say anything, a country offering various possibilities, and, thus, a country of opportunists where an individual is encouraged to act with no thought spared for the community, then such an America is an apotheosis of the Trickster, he concludes.⁸⁵ If, he argues, the Trickster is always on the road, personifies ambiguity and "steals the fire" in order to discover new technologies, it means he still exists because nothing has disappeared from this world.

Translated by Helena Belava

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⁷⁹ Davis (1998–1999: 51).

⁸⁰ Kazmierczak (2001: 145).

⁸¹ Hyde (2008: 9).

⁸² Fleck.

⁸³ Panchia.

⁸⁴ Wa – Conner.

⁸⁵ Hyde (2008: 11).

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Trickster or jester/clown?

In recent years one may observe a renewed interest in the theory of an eminent Russian linguist and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (an example of this phenomenon may be an exhibition *My i oni* (Us and Them) which was held in the International Cultural Center in Cracow from the 16 March to the 5 June, 2011). Yet one should note here that the first wave of fascination with Bakhtin's writings in Poland occurred in the early 70s of the twentieth century, in connection with the fashion for structuralism and semiotics; among others, this interest found its reflection in the publications of Stefan Żółkowski, Mieczysław Porębski or Michał Głowiński¹.

In his research on the writings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and François Rabelais, Bakhtin introduced the concept of carnivalized literature, treating the phenomenon of the carnival in a very broad manner, looking at it from the vantage point of anthropology of culture and associating with it as well as

with its impact, very many political, social, literary and artistic phenomena².

It would be difficult at this point to summarize Bakhtin's theory which should anyway be familiar to every scholar of literature and art; therefore, I shall limit myself exclusively to pointing out those elements of his conception which are associated with the topic of the present address. A carnival which is a type of safety valve that gives vent to the accumulated conflicts and tensions, consists in a temporary suspension of the laws that govern a given community; it also consists in the reversal of social roles and hierarchies, that is in the creation of a parodist, topsy-turvy world. In the inverted world of the carnival, the masters serve the slaves. Among the special forms of carnival behavior, one finds for instance the masquerade, particularly the swapping of man's and women's attire, some examples of obscene conduct, intemperate consumption of food and drunkenness (creating the so called feasting or banqueting culture) which are accom-

¹ The author of the present article also succumbed to this fashion; the outcome of this interest was his doctoral dissertation entitled *Groteska w sztuce polskiej XX wieku* [The grotesque in the Polish art of the 20th century] written under the supervision of Prof. Mieczysław Porębski, defended in the year 1981 and published by the Cracow Wydawnictwo Literackie Publishing House in the year 1984.

² In the 70s and at the beginning of the 80s, the following works appeared in the Polish language: *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, *The Writings of François Rabelais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, and *Some Problems of Literature and Aesthetics* in which Bakhtin sheds light on various aspects of the relation between carnival and literature.

panied by laughter, parody, humor and elements of the grotesque. For the duration of the carnival, a parodist and clownish king is elected who ultimately becomes dethroned, ridiculed or offered in sacrifice at the end of the feast.

Various genres of “foral” – street or market art – such as for instance the Italian *comedia dell'arte*, with the trickster-like characters, such as: Harlequin, Pierrot, Captain, Doctor, Pantalon and the like, emerged from the carnival rituals and games. *Comedia dell'arte* exerted a strong influence on the development of theatre comedy, among others on Moliere's plays, as well as on the opera, for instance on Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892), as well as on the circus, in which there appear jesters and clowns³.

In the 19th century, under the influence of the ideology of Romanticism, a special interest was aroused by the figure of a sad fool (among others, Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) who under the guise of laughter, concealed an extremely sensitive soul and a penetrating intellect. The best known, wise fool in the Polish art was Jan Matejko's *Stańczyk* (Jester), whom the painter had lent his own facial features to, in this way identifying himself with him. Matejko's *Stańczyk* (Jester) is a genuine carnival king who turns out to be more insightful and penetrating than the king himself.

Whereas in the 20th century, in connection with inspirations derived from the world of the circus, the avant-garde artist tended to identify himself to a greater extent with another carnival character, namely that of the clown; in the film art, fascinations with the world of the circus can be found most fully in Charlie Chaplin's comedies, in Ingmar Bergman's *The Evening of the Clowns* (1953), and particularly in *La strada* (1954), *The Clowns* (1970), as well as in all the films of Federico Fellini⁴.

³ In their popular book on the circus, Rupert Croft-Cooke and Peter Cotes express a view that the term clown comes from an old-Norwegian word “klunni”, denoting a simpleton as well as from the Dutch word “klunter” – meaning clumsy, ungainly, or else “proper gormless” (complete fool), Croft-Cooke, Cotes (1986: 110). In turn Bohdan Danowicz in his book devoted to the history of the circus, derives the word ‘clown’ from the English word <clod> meaning “originally a lout, clod or simply a peasant, that is someone who is uncouth and churlish”, Danowicz (1984: 152).

⁴ Din-Don (Edward Manc) who was one of the most popular circus comedians during the inter-war period records in his memoirs: “There were ‘reprise’ clowns who performed exclusively during the intervals, in-between the riding stunts;

Concluding in his well-known book *Granica współczesności* (The boundary of contemporary times), published in 1965 that this boundary falls for the years 1909–1925, Mieczysław Porębski⁵ treats the period of the formation of the avant-garde, whose king was Pablo Picasso, as a specific carnival, during which the social roles and artistic canons became reversed⁶. Picasso, who was a frequent visitor to the Fernando circus (also known under the name of Médrano) in Montmartre in Paris, drew inspiration from it not only for the subjects of his early paintings, but also identified himself to some extent with the position of a circus performer; this was reflected particularly in his unconventional manner, casual clothes, and a provocative, experimental and transgressive character of his art. Therefore, he may be regarded – metaphorically speaking – as the first clown of 20th century art.

The successive clown of the avant-garde – Marcel Duchamp had led to a specific dethronement of Picasso. Duchamp treated the existing conception of a work of art as a sublime, unique creation of individual talent, at the service of aesthetic contemplation, in a parodist manner by turning such a standard and trivial object as a urinal into a sculpture, the famous *Fountain* and by creating the first transparent painting: *The Large Glass*, a work maintained in the spirit of irony and the grotesque⁷.

there were carpet clowns – who entertained the audience during the changing of stage props, and finally, there were <entrée> clowns – the latter presented whole comical episodes. The <entrée> clowns are divided into redheads and whites. The two types usually performed together for better contrast () The white clown, clothed in a beautiful satin attire, adorned with silver and gold sequins, usually wore white stockings, whereas his face was painted like a Pierrot – symbolizing an ironic and malicious skeptic or else a wealthy man. In most cases he tried to poke fun at and ridicule the good-natured loser in the red wig, wearing patched and oversized clothes and worn-out shoes without soles as well as a frayed hat. There was great joy and exhilaration in the circus when the naïve and poor wretch managed to trick the elegant white clown. It is worth recalling here that at one time Charlie Chaplin was such a <redhead> naïve wretch and that it was him who transferred this character from the circus arena to the big screen, Din-Don (1961: 24).

⁵ Porębski (1965).

⁶ Porębski (1966).

⁷ In his book devoted to the circus, communication and culture, published by the University of Bordeaux, Hugues Hotier holds forth a view that clowns introduce into the arena an element of laughter which is expressed through burlesque, parody and the grotesque: “Dénomination sans doute à fait justifiée quand on sait que ce comique était essentiellement burlesque et parodique. Le grotesque entrain en piste pour se moquer des vrais artistes qui l'avaient précédé”, Hotier (1995: 168). Applying Din-Don's distinction mentioned in footnote 4 above, we could conclude that Picasso would be

By treating his life as an artistic creation, a specific work of art, Duchamp made use of a whole range of carnival behaviors and poses, among which there was dressing up as a woman, which had led to the creation of the character of Rose Sélavy. A similar inclination towards disguising and pantomime was displayed by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, one of the leading creators of literary and artistic grotesque in Polish art.

The role of anti-art and of Dadaism in the shaping of the inversive, carnival model of art which introduced trivial objects and the poetic of parody into art, is well known, yet one should recall here the precursor role of a Paris association of *Incoherents* (also referred to as *Hydropathes*), which was set up by a Paris journalist and editor Jules Lévy (1857–1935), as early as in 1882. The Polish reader has recently become better acquainted with the activity of this group by obtaining a translation of Luce Abéles' and Catherine Charpin's book *Incoherent Arts*⁸.

Pervaded by the spirit of the grotesque and of transgressiveness, the 20th century avant-garde art brought about a whole series of artist clowns and jesters; a good example here may be the attitude and artistic achievement of Salvador Dalí. In the performance entitled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), Joseph Beuys dressed up as a clown. The dead hare which is held by Beuys brings to mind an association with another character from popular culture, namely that of an conjuror or magician who is pulling a rabbit – another animal belonging to the hare-family – out of a hat.

Besides the circus, the 20th c. avant-garde was fascinated with the world of cabaret and stage shows. A conjuror-manipulator who uses tricks in order to surprise the audience and put it under the spell of illusion, nearly reminds us of the attitude of the present-day artist⁹. In Beuys' performances one comes across a combination of two personalities: that of an artist clown and an artist trickster¹⁰.

The juxtaposition of an artist/priest and artist/jester introduced at one time by Leszek Kołakowski

should be recognized as an accurate and poignant classification category for the Polish literature and art of the second half of the 20th c. Carnivalization and buffoonery appeared on a wider scale in Polish art only in the 70s of the 20th c. in connection with the popularization of performance and conceptual art, for instance in the activity of Anasztazy Wiśniewski. Yet it was only in the 80's of the 20th century, at the time of the introduction of martial law in Poland, that one deals with a radical split between the two major trends in Polish art: namely one that is characterized by pathetic-martyrological elements, in which the artist played a para-religious and priestly role, and the other trend which degraded the violence of the totalitarian authorities through ridicule and humor, where the artist had assumed the role of a clown.

One of the first artistic groups which used the strategy of farce in the degradation of power – not only political, but one which relates to all kinds of power: corporate, artistic, moral and religious as well as church power – was the group Łódź Kaliska, in such provocative actions as the *Porno-Tango Festival* (1985), *The Drop-in Culture* (kultura zrzuty) and many others. Adam Rzepecki who assumed the role of the jester and clown can be recognized as the carnival king of Łódź Kaliska. A photograph showing the artist who is breast-feeding an infant is a classic example of carnival inversion, characterized by elements of parody and buffoonery (ill. 1). Group photographs in which the artists created live images, reconstructing and at the same time parodying well-known paintings, can be recognized as a typical example of grotesque travesty, and at the same time of degradation through humor of the object of aesthetic cult (ill. 2).

In their activities, the artists belonging to the latter trend, to which one should also incorporate the activity of such Polish artistic formations of the 80s as Koło Klipsa, Luxus, Gruppa, or Pomarańczowa Alternatywa (The Orange Alternative) – a group that specialized in para-artistic protests, revealed the hypocrisy, possessiveness and the violence of the authorities as well as the false values professed by the contemporary society. Irony, provocation, obscenity, blasphemy and masquerade became the major tools of their derisive strategy.

Following the political transformation of 1989, this split into: on the one hand the lofty, para-sacral trend, and on the other hand, the derisive-carnival one focused on moral provocation and blasphemy,

a "redhead" clown, whom Hotier calls Augustus (Auguste), whereas Duchamp would be a "white" clown, that is a Pierrot.

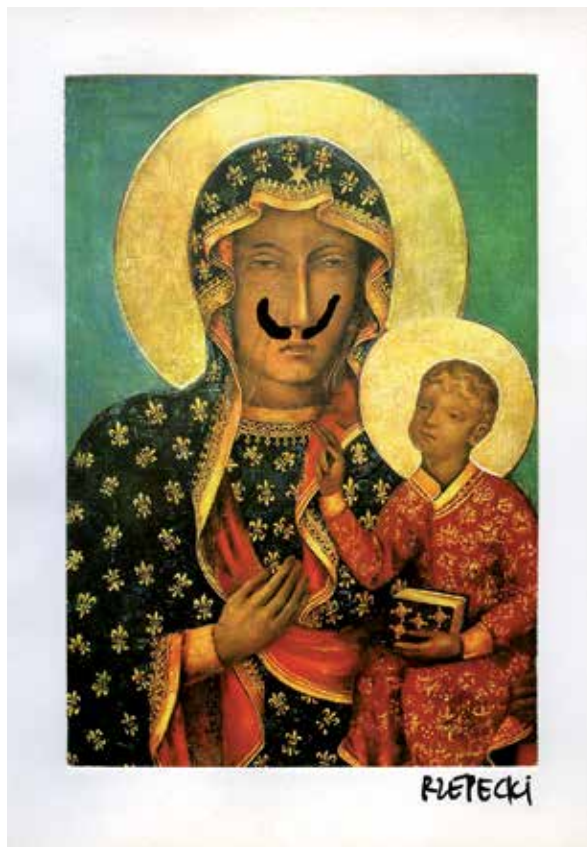
⁸ Abéles, Charpin (2003).

⁹ The term „conjuror-manipulator” is used by Jerzy Meczaldowski Caroni in his book entitled *A Handbook of the Art of Illusion* (Meczaldowski Caroni 1985).

¹⁰ The motif of a clown occurred directly in the production of another leading representative of the neo-avant-garde, namely Bruce Nauman in his performance *Clown Torture*, 1987.



Ill. 1. Adam Rzepecki, *Polish Father. A project of a monument*, 10 July 1981, courtesy of the artist



Ill. 2. Adam Rzepecki, *The Black Madonna of Częstochowa with moustache*, 1982, courtesy of the artist

not only did not disappear, but deepened radically. In their manifestations, the neo-Dadaist attitude was continued in the 90s of the last century by some representatives of the so called critical art, although a certain section of this milieu aspired and continues to aspire to the role of mentors, through reaching out to social and historical problems which are treated in a rather fundamental way, devoid of the derisive distance.

A successive wave of interest in the poetic of the grotesque appeared at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty first century, and it coincided with the emergence of a new generation of artists on the Polish artistic scene. Two Krakow groups should be incorporated into this new generation, namely: the Ładnie and the Azorro Group. Before the paintings of Wilhelm Sasnal, Marcin Maciejowski and Rafał Bujnowski became valuable objects of the art trade, the Ładnie Group had organized various provocative actions in public space, which were initiated by the now slightly forgotten Marek Firek, their one-time mentor and informal leader. Yet it was not the latter who had put on the clown's mask. For it was Józef Tomczyk Kurosawa who had been proclaimed the carnival king of the Ładnie Group.

The Azorro Supergroup which was set up in the year 2000 consists of four members: Oskar Dawicki, Igor Krenz, Wojciech Niedzielko and Łukasz Skąpski. Before setting up the group, each of their members had already accumulated quite a large baggage of achievement in the sphere of performance, installation or video art. The favorite poetic of these artists is irony and mockery directed at the seriously treated aesthetic and thematic axioms. The neo-Dadaist degradation through laughter characterizes particularly the activity of Oskar Dawicki, who is yet another artist wearing a clown's mask. A good example of the inverted, carnival reality is a very funny film shot by the Azorro Group in the year 2003, entitled *Pyxis systematis domestici quod video dicitur*. During their trip to Vienna where they were to prepare an exhibition of their works, the artists spoke exclusively in Latin, not only when speaking to one another, but also when exchanging information with the employees of petrol stations during breaks in their journey, at newsagents and ultimately in the MUMOK museum in Vienna. Naturally, this was a clear case of mystification and mockery.

The current youngest generation of artists also reach out to the carnival paradigm. The fictional



Ill. 3. Mateusz Okoński, *Purification*, Vistula River, Grolsch Art-Boom Festival, Krakow 2012, photo: Tomasz Gryglewicz

character of artist Rahim Blak, created in the year 2003 by two students of the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts: Rahim Ajdarevic and Michał Blak, constitutes yet another embodiment of artist-clown. By applying the strategies of mystification and self-promotion, Rahim Blak aspires to the role of Tadeusz Kantor's successor as the leader of the Cracow avant-garde. As the place of his activity, Rahim Blak selected the Folia Club situated in the Main Market Square, which was managed by Ewa Janicka, the wife of Waclaw Janicki, one of the twin brothers who had been actors in Kantor's theatre Cricot II. Thus, the Folia Club had been treated as a new "Krzysztofory" Gallery (the place of Kantor's artistic activity). After their graduation, the artists continued their experiment with fictional identity, and through their numerous provocations and controversial activities gained considerable fame and publicity. Among others, Rahim Blak had designed the Al-Fan Muslim Center in Cracow. The most recent phase in Rahim Blak's activity focuses on the foundation of an artistic corporation known as *Art world*TM.

Among Rahim Ajdarevik's and Michał Blak's peers, one finds members of the Cracow Group "Strupek" (Scab). Already the very name of the group has a provocative and slightly embarrassing ring. Mateusz Okoński, the main leader and founder of "Strupek" gained notoriety through his diploma work at the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts, entitled *Purification* which he defended in the year 2010 (ill. 3); for his diploma, Okoński designed a marble sculpture of a dead pig which was to have been placed on a concrete pedestal – remnant of a demolished bridge – along the Vistula river.

The degrading edge of parody and mockery is usually directed by the ascending generation of artists at those artistic formations which having already attained artistic success, and are trying to completely monopolize the artistic scene, particularly by applying the tactic of moral blackmail. A very active street-level and guerilla art group, known as the Krasnals (Dwarfs), who usually appear with covered faces, base their activity on the parody of mainstream artists and milieus. The very name of the group has a parodist character as it alludes to

the activities of a group called Pomarańczowa Alternatywa (The Orange Alternative), whose members disguised as dwarfs (Adam Rzepecki also created an exhibition for dwarfs); it is also an allusion to the name of one of the leading Polish painters representing the younger generation. The activity of the Krasnals gained considerable notoriety, thanks to their provocative contestations, among others at the 54th Venice Biennial, the Malta Festival in Poznań and at the European Congress of Culture in Wrocław (all three events took place in the year 2011). The Krasnals promote their activity on the internet, therefore it is not necessary to present their main assumptions in the current paper. Thus, the Krasnals are becoming yet another embodiment of artists-clowns, continuing the carnival tradition of the *Incoherents* and the Dadaists on the wider artistic plane, whereas taking into consideration the Polish art perspective of the last decades, they occupy a place at the very end of the clownish line, delineated by the neo-Dadaist actions of Łódź Kaliska and the grotesque resistance of Pomarańczowa Alternatywa (The Orange Alternative).

Summing up: as usual, it is difficult to provide an unequivocal answer to the query posed in the title of the present paper, whether in the artistic activity of 20th c. artists one comes across the strategy of a cunning and malicious prankster-trickster, or rather whether one can speak of the phenomenon of an artist embodying himself in the comic character of a fool-clown. The attitude of an artist clown in the sense given to it by Bakhtin is inscribed in the context of his theory of the carnival and the problem of transgression which is associated with it; the latter seems more universal than the position of an artist-trickster or hooligan. The context of a wide impact of the circus on the art and culture of the 20th century adds more semantic depth to the metaphor of an artist-clown. A jester and his successor clown are more closely bound with the phenomenon of the culture of laughter, than a trickster. Yet, in the case of many artists, both these attitudes may occur simultaneously, as they by no means exclude one another. For while revealing the hypocrisy, possessiveness and violence of those who wield power, as well as the false values which the contemporary society often professes, the artists of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century reached out to such poetics and strategies as irony, degradation, ridicule, provocation, scandal, parody, persiflage, disgust, obscenity, blasphemy, masquerade or buf-

foonery, which are made use of by both clowns and tricksters.

Translated by Piotr Mizia

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Tricksters and others

„The world is a masquerade. Looks, dress and voice, everything is pretension. Everyone wants to be what he is not. Everyone is deceiving and no one ever knows himself.”

Francisco Goya

This quotation, excavated from the abyss of time, is just to begin with. In a famous textbook on rhetoric originated in the 1st century AD entitled *Ad Herennium* we come across a passage dedicated to operation of our memory: „When we see in everyday life things that are petty, ordinary, and banal, we generally fail to remember them, because the mind is not being stirred by anything novel or marvelous. But if we see or hear something exceptionally base, dishonourable, extraordinary, great, unbelievable, or laughable, that we are likely to remember a long time. [...] Nor could this be so for any other reason than that ordinary things easily slip from the memory while the striking and novel stay longer in mind. [...] We ought, then, to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in the memory. And we shall do so if we establish likenesses as striking as possible; if we set up images that are not many or vague, but doing something (*imagines agentes*); if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we dress some of them with crowns or

purple cloaks, for example, so that the likeness may be more distinct to us; or if we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint, so that its form is more striking, or by assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that, too will ensure our remembering them more readily. The things we easily remember when they are real we likewise remember without difficulty when they are figments [...]”¹.

Remembering also the fact that Mnemosyne – the Muse of memory – is mother of all Muses², we may peacefully undergo a transition to another realm of civilisation existence, namely to the area which since its very beginning has operated in a mythological or historical dimension as a vision of somehow Utopian „reverse world”, where elements of fiction made real, extreme reevaluation of recognised values, and, unfortunately, and final turning back towards them in often very drastic existential paroxysms, make a relatively coherent system of actions with the aim of not so much a radical change but abreaction of social and political shell of external imposed norms and rules. I am writing about this because I gather we tend to forget that

¹ Quotation follows Cicero (1954: 219–221).

² Compare: Praz (1970).

in thousands of years of our cultural circle not so much “all has already been” but rather almost all bear more or less clear resemblance, and we ought to follow these analogies and reveal them so that we will not reinvent the wheel and be satisfied with new names labelled to traditional indeed artistic – but not only artistic – events. And here figure of a jester should be connoted. The figure has functioned in literature for almost 2.5 thousand years (the oldest preserved evidence referring to profession of a jester dates back at the turn of 4th century BC and was included in writings by Athenaeus of Naucratis) – as in so-called reality it has been present since always. A jester for ages “has assimilated man’s dreams of lost freedom, irresistible desire of flight from this world and the parallel yearning for eternal stay in it. The figure focuses human anxieties and dreams, but also fears, aggression and any possible deviations”³.

I will not write about mythological roots of clown-like, comic, but also somehow tragic and menacing demiurge whose acts were about to balance the acts of gods situated on the light side of force, as art, and even less history of art, does not reach so far in the past. Still we have to keep it in memory – memory again – as we shall not comprehend how to find ourselves on the other side of dialectic balance, how to cope with contemporary actions, which possibly want to enter some kind of mythology (to create it?), but whose chances in this matter are, let’s call it, minimal as, unfortunately, they are of a half-way and often senseless character. However, the eternal *imagines agentes* are still active – to dress as a dog or Superman (to pretend a dog or Superman) is good enough – it would be something to become a dog or Superman so that someone could keep it in memory, to expose a half-obscene work in a renowned gallery so as to someone would follow it and claim it a form of opposition and revelation going beyond so-called social norms and at the same time it would occur to be an outstanding work of art. I would like to be well understood at this moment, as a man of words rather than images, I tolerate this kind of actions, I have no special resistance of moral nature against them as I am, delicately speaking, indifferent in this matter. What rather tires me more than outrages in this type of “trickstering” is, sadly, its secondary nature and meagreness of thought effecting from hitting

(presenting, besmearing) the undoubtedly tender social spheres, still the same ones, in my opinion. Here a question emerges – how long is it possible to perform – reveal – struggle with existing hierarchies, to be a mocker in a situation when often almost no one cares about it, except for the so-called art world and noisy but, in my opinion, of little importance religious-political groups. A jester cannot be alone and tries to find a court and a king in front of whom he will be able to perform his tricks and well-aimed ripostes in speech. There is some lack of kings but there are plenty of courts still operating. A co-creator of a contemporary “reverse world” should be enlightened and I gather that he forgets, being often tied up with numerous market strategies and conceptual loops, that his road should lead him to Morosoph – a wise jester, or actually a priest of a new religion – religion of authenticity and not of constant pretensions imposed on us by kingdoms and their rulers. As a jester present in art – I am not certain if it refers to a trickster also – brings to it “important relations with a carnival [...], his <<way of being>> has a metaphorical not ordinary meaning, it is at the same time a reflection of some other way of being” and following Mirosław Słowiński’s words: “Both in real life and in fiction he has a special right to be a stranger. Sometimes a question should be posed if this special right is a privilege or a judgement”⁴.

Therefore, we move along the thin red line of so-called “important truth”, which is not so much to reflect but rather to contradict events or trivial and useless issues of everyday life. Artists in old times during a creation process often used to identify with the subject of creation, when painting trees they wanted to be a tree and feel all forces active in this tree. Here comes a question if we negate the possibility of identifying and we only pretend a tree in a naturally inefficient way our art possesses any extra-momentary, extra-environmental value. You cannot laugh all the time, mockery lasts a moment, jokes in altered circumstances are not funny any longer, dressing up makes sense during carnivals, later on it is only an empty, or even to call it pathological, gesture, unless we claim that our carnival has no end at all, and culture of constant laughter and fun is a formula that is still applicable at present.

In many mythologies juggler – and scamp-like demiurges, though essential for maintaining cos-

³ Słowiński (1993: 5).

⁴ Słowiński (1993: 10).

mic balance, most often finally lose, as in a reverse situation a chaos would rule, still the laughter they evoke is crucial for purification, joy, eventually order and world balance. Followers of these totemic jesters had different names: Aesop, Marcolf, Till Eulenspiegel and they appeared at the very moment when a man noticed that “this one next to me thinks differently, not only from me but differently from the whole brotherhood, from the whole tribe – and then this brainy observer became astonished, he might laugh, then he started to persuade, got angry and eventually either he expelled the mad-cap, or killed him, or he laughed again and used to laugh every time he saw him. This <<stranger>>, furthermore weaker and shorter, realised in a moment of illumination that this laughter is his last chance”⁵. Relatively rarely we hear nowadays of killing tricksters, although the profession is certainly exposed to numerous inconveniences, what makes it very attractive for quite many. Our “culture of laughter” has a different face from the one in Renaissance times, as it is attracted – co-created by contemporary media, whose gluttony in this matter is immeasurable. Artists cannot – are not capable of getting out of media as they will not be artists any longer. It means they are still artists, but they have no influence on anything to an even bigger extent than usually. Hence there are numerous affairs, attempts and approaches, hence the struggle for not being left on the margin, hence so rare certificates of own, not forced by media, choices of a wonderful, in my opinion, attitude of splendid isolation.

Nowadays we do not notice processions of jesters’ brotherhoods, a graffiti image of a donkey in cardinal’s robes on a wall of a tenement house would certainly provoke a city guard’s reaction at the most, ships crowded with madmen do not enter ports (or maybe we are just not aware of this?). Art, if created, meets soft chaotic structures and accidental convictions, popular statements, celebrities’ hierarchies changing every day, the world of overpowering, self-satisfied stupidity which thinks that it is always right. Can stupidity be fought with stupidity, can we indicate any methods – e.g. major stupidity against minor one, or perhaps the other way round, radical stupidity versus procrastinating one, irreligious versus religious, absurd versus serious stupidity? We have to remember that in the world of old jesters, as stressed by Michał

Głowiński, no scenario allowed them “to express everything”, they also have interdictions, they were not allowed to utter complete truths, there were borders not to be crossed.⁶ Are there any restrictions of this kind in the world of today’s tricksters, and don’t we notice that most often they say not much leaving vast areas to sensible silence or, even worse, to medial buzz flowing from all directions? Certainly, we know that art cannot rescue us, that the greatest madness – privilege of the insane and artists – must end one day, and that even the most weary river eventually reaches the sea. However, we have to remember that both once and today “creating is a basic issue of human existence, basic problem of almost every world view. Inability of solving this problem, inability of creative realisation means non-existence”⁷. Once, a jester used to pay the price of isolation and loneliness for the right to utter truth, public expression of opinions on the world of his time. Is it still true today, and has the artistic attitude, close to an old concept of buffoonery, undiminished by the very fact of operating in the society in medial sense – who media talk about if not about nowadays rebels and “artists *maudite*”, people who break rules and chairs in hotels, dying at their young age from drug overdose. Is someone who shows a figure of God’s Mother, moreover Lady of Lourdes in an aquarium in a gallery, a trickster, or is Paris Hilton a trickster by saying after her arrival in Katowice that it is a “beautiful city” (Paris has said this leaving the plane at night, wearing dark glasses and having never seen Katowice before). How great self-conscience of actions is demanded in such cases. Is it an artist’s or in majority an audience’s self-conscience? What is the relation between concepts of a trickster and “eccentricity” – the article’s author can still remember times when in circuses, next to lions, tigers and acrobats so-called “eccentrics”, “crankiness”, more or less controlled pathology, or not to say total, more or less authentic originality were used to be performed.

To be honest, on behalf of this text, which luckily is heading for its end, I have reread a list of titles focusing on relation between “genius and insanity” – from Cesare Lombroso to Paul Johnson⁸, and I can still remember odd behaviour – comic and

⁵ Słowiński (1993: 21).

⁶ 6 Głowiński, (1974: 8, 80).

⁷ Słowiński (1993: 73).

⁸ compare: Lombroso (1987), Johnson (1994), by the same author (2008).

scary – of many of the geniuses, who except for “being a genius”, used to cheat, steal, commit adultery, murder quite often, did not take anyone or anything into consideration, they had such escalated compulsions that they would be perceived as people acting against common peace and social order, *ergo* people worth medial interest, provided they lived till today, and revealed their obsessions. Certainly I am not going to tell these stories, though getting to know them would make extension of the area of actions, “events” and “performances” easier for many contemporary tricksters. Speaking seriously, it seems that this difference results from comparison of “being the other” in the past times in an own, often tragically private way, and the present situation when the information about “being the other” is broadcasted to gain not so much fame and success, though these goals are also undoubtedly important, to “exist against”, “react to”, “stand up against”, “talk about”, “brand” and “reveal”. Genius and insanity, thanks to these enforced by media processes, transform from carefully hidden pathological states into socially demanded states, what occasionally brings doubts about both perceiving an artist as a genius and, if we can call it this, the “quality” of his insanity. This naturally does not have to diminish our every-day admiration for him and the will to describe his revealed to the world actions. Being insane is, however, something different – to make it clear let us follow Antoni Kępiński with his definition that insanity is “pathological gaining freedom instead of reality and eventually gaining captivity not in the real but psychotic world created as a result of projection of what is most private and intimate – into the surrounding world”⁹, from accepting an artistic strategy which is standing up against a reasonable world viewing, and what more from the level of a so-called average audience. It is easy to be an iconoclast, a scandalising one, “the other” – in a common and not philosophical meaning of the word. It is easy to bewilder and destroy hierarchies as the realm of thought is weaken, and stereotypes are so clear that is shameful, in my opinion, to reveal and demolish them (revealing something known to all is not revealing but comes as a form of primitive tautology).

Well, here is enough of this somehow senile moralising. I would only wish to remind at the end of the text one of my favourite books *Salto mor-*

tale do wewnątrz [*Kotilow or Salto mortale burns inward*] by Kurt Sigel¹⁰. The book was published first in 1977 (Polish edition in 1983) and it is a story of a schizophrenic called vibrantly Kotilow, who is also an artist. Kotilow has no first name and he is always Kotilow only, he loves art, for example “art of flying away. It allows him to hover with arms flapping and splayed fingers, always in rising winds. Kotilow often sees himself as a red-and-yellow fat caterpillar. Then he has enormous weight and he sticks to himself”. Kotilow destroys “censorship of conscience”, in his free time he practises “art of urinating”, he knows that he has invented himself and that “he is a cannibal and he eats himself bit by bit. First he throws his black hairy arm into a soup kettle. Since yesterday his right ear has been missing”, dream and reality are always equally real for him and occasionally he tries painting by cutting with a sharp knife geometrical figures in the air, or he creates “peculiar configurations of clouds with the aim of updraughts and air layers of different temperatures”, and concentric circles appearing after a stone throw into a clay pit. He was worried he could not arrange an exhibition of so created pictures, and he realised this when he had hit his nose, in a moment of inattention, against a kitchen window pane – is it a memory of Duchamp? and “the lines of the crack fascinated him. But when he wanted to try out the same method of artistic creation on every pane in his house, the pictures disintegrated into pieces before they were really created. The same with his nose by the way. Kotilow realised that possibility of failure is inseparably inscribed into existence of a creative man. Every order carries a possibility of decay. Or the other way round”¹¹.

I will not multiply the quotations, as I would have to quote a half of this “mini novel”, to cut a long story short, Kotilow eventually wins/loses? with his illness, he gets normal, his pension is made redundant and he loses his allowance from the Social Care what makes him work and he takes on a post in a city public toilet. Still he feels that “only madmen are truly free”. Since his healing he has not been able to say with certainty whether he is happy, he recalls his former existence, occasionally he feels emptiness of some kind and undefined fear of the

⁹ Quotation from Słowiński (1993: 73).

¹⁰ Sigel (1983).

¹¹ All quotations come from the mentioned edition of Sigel, following pages: 11, 15, 18, 25, 26, 110.

very possibility that he could miss something, slowly he directs himself towards oblivion. “He is stuck motionless – what is interrupted from time to time by reaching out the hand – on his folded stool and he is waiting. He actually doesn’t know what is he waiting on. But Kotilow is waiting”. The novel last sentence goes like this: “His dream is a dream with no dreams, his pulse is normal, his stool is regular. Kotilow is a living dead, not realising this”.¹²

Perhaps because of the fear of such an end the true artists fight with themselves and the world, they perform a “somersault [salto mortale] inwards”, believing that someone will notice it. And the attitude of a jester – a trickster? We have to believe that it is “a constant effort of reflection over potential rights of contradictory ideas [...] it is simply overcoming this what is just because it is; it is ruled not by a will of contrariness but distrust in any stabilised world. In the world where apparently everything has already happened, it is a motion of imagination, and hence it is defined also by the resistance it has to overcome”¹³.

¹² Sigel (1983; 117).

¹³ Kołakowski (1957: 27), compare also: Słowiński (1993: 74).

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Tricksters lead the game

This paper explores philosophical and conceptual background of artistic 'trickster' strategies and suggests that the notion of play/game is an indispensable research tool in this subject. Who is a contemporary trickster in the world of art? It seems that this position is no longer marginal – to be in the move, to be outside, on the margins of, or in-between the dominant narratives of power – beyond the usual order of things in cultural, social, political or economical realms, has become the 'proper' space of the artistic activity. The 'margins' of social life are treated as the points of departure to pose essential questions. Paradoxically, to occupy 'the interstices' of human relations means to be in the centre of the contemporary discourse on art and culture. Zygmunt Bauman describes it as follows:

"I propose that in the same way as the pilgrim was the most fitting metaphor for the modern life strategy preoccupied with the daunting task of identity-building, the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player offer jointly the metaphor for the post-modern strategy moved by the horror of being bound and fixed."¹

The trickster joins this company; however, in the context of art, I propose to identify him or her with one specific role – of a game master. Artist/

trickster no longer simply plays games or tricks – he or she leads the others, as Allan Kaprow predicted more than 40 years ago – artists have become 'educators in play' – they arrange or provoke the game-like situations.

It is necessary to briefly introduce the interpretation of the notion of play applied in this context. Play can be effectively applied as a model for aesthetically inspiring, process-oriented, participatory or relational art, however, only when we go beyond its one-sided and stereotypical interpretations as innocent, creative and democratic. In fact, the contradictions inevitably break into any attempt to define play: it 'is supposed to be disengaged from reality in a variety of ways, while at the same time it is credited with a great number of useful real-life functions'; it is "at the same time in and out of reality"². Norman Denzin in the essay *The Paradoxes of Play* writes:

"Play is a recurring interactional form whose content and substance must be established on every occasion of its occurrence.

Recognizable and familiar, evidenced in divergent cultural, ethnic, racial, age-sex graded communities, play is ineffable, always novel and unique; never the same, yet somehow always the same."³

¹ Bauman (1996: 25–26).

² Csikszentmihalyi (1981: 14).

³ Denzin (1982: 13).

Denzin, after Gregory Bateson, approaches play as a frame for action. Within this frame, as he writes, “persons find themselves playing”. According to him, the shift from noun to verb reveals flexible and mobile character of play and locates it primarily as a social process. Denzin also stresses that play contains elements of doubt, risk, threat and uncertainty. “What play threatens is the player’s body and the player’s felt definition of self in the moment”⁴. Play must be therefore seen as stretched between safety and danger. It suspends or modifies rules of the given ‘reality’, so potentially creates a ‘safety zone’ or a ‘magic circle’, but this alternative space challenges the routine of the usual identifications and patterns of behaviour. The tension between familiar and unfamiliar, safe and risky, oneself and the other, repetition and experiment, reality and fiction, constitute the unique position of play. It cannot be therefore defined as either controllable or excessive; rational or sensual; democratic or aristocratic/authoritarian; as either didactic tool supporting development or forbidden drug liberating from all constraints. Play undermines any *decorum* and pulls out the rug from under any authority. Likewise in Derrida ‘play’ means movement of any structure, like “give or tolerance..., which works against ideas of self-sufficiency and absolute completion”⁵.

I use the phrase ‘game master’ to describe the position of a post-modern artist as based on the tension between *homo ludens* – the careless player, the naughty child, the ‘grasshopper’, and post-industrial *homo faber* – the entrepreneur, the legitimate provider of a unique ‘experience’, the careful organizer of the tours to ‘real life’. I will sketch here a subjective characterisation of the artist-game master, my own interpretation/ representation of this paradoxical persona. There exist various roles he/she can adopt – mutually exclusive or maybe complementary, or even necessary to locate this function within the domain of art.

There is one sentence by Jacques Derrida that comes to my mind when I think about contemporary artists (game masters). Derrida writes about god Thoth – the ambiguous figure – the magician, the bookkeeper, the pharmacist – “messenger-god”, ‘the god of the absolute passage between opposites’... Sly, slippery and masked, an intriguer and a card,

like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a wild card, one who puts play into play.”⁶ Puts play into play... plays with the game... is played by the game...

‘Master’ immediately calls for the notions of authority, power and gender; it designates the one who possesses skills and goods, and takes control over his disciples or servants. In the art world it is a title reserved for maestros, the great (male) masters of the past. It is also an academic degree title, a sign of scholarship and specialisation. All these notions of a ‘master’ seem to imply the position that 20th and 21st century artists have tried to overturn. ‘Mastery’ is a suspicious notion condemned by the proponents of ‘relational’ or ‘dialogic’ art, who see the artist not as someone who dominates the process, but rather gently initiates and models situations. The notion of a ‘master’ does not fit within the post-modern agenda of the critique of representation as “a mode of thinking and a relationship to the world that involves a will to fixity and mastery”⁷.

Locating leadership and authority within the domain of game/play makes it an ambivalent function and undermines the artist’s will and the possibility to be in total control. In the world of games and specifically Role-Playing Games, game master is a person who creates a setting and coordinates action. He or she leads other players through the imaginary world emerging from the collective and interactive storytelling. The game master – an authority within the temporary frames of fiction – supplements the traditional account of mastery with the notions of collaboration, participation and the democratic negotiation of rules, but also incompetence, letting go or subversion. The artist-game master is no longer the exclusive and dominant source of power, meaning and knowledge – neither the average player. The mixture of non-functional knowledge (too abstract or too specific), life experience and the willingness to learn and research various ‘realities’ in order to temporarily shift their rules, constitutes the figure of the game master in the realm of art – a jester and a sage.

⁴ Denzin (1982: 20).

⁵ Lucy (2004: 95).

⁶ Derrida (1997: 93).

⁷ Bolt (2004: 17).

Sly, slippery and masked

As Allan Kaprow suggests in his essays from the '70s,⁸ artists should abandon the activity of art-making and become players – slip between professional categories, test various identities and lead others in the social exchange based on play. It seems to me that things have actually gone this way. Contemporary artists work (play) within the social sphere and try to transgress the hermetic world of aesthetic or art-specific concerns. They leave the studios of the art world and enter the worlds of politics, economy, religion, biotechnology, ecology, medicine, education, social care and social control, psychology, trade and services, among many others. They are at once responsible 'service providers' and players – 'masked intriguers' who juggle conventions and other peoples' emotions; educators who represent the world through the temporary logic and order (or disorder) of the created game-world and provocateurs, pranksters who test the boundaries of the proper and the accepted, and push/seduce participants into the controversial situation.

In 2003 a Polish artist Zuzanna Janin staged her own funeral procession (*I've Seen My Death*). After the death announcements in national newspapers, the actual funeral took place. The artist disguised as an old woman, members of her family (aware that it was a performance) and members of the artworld (unaware) participated in the event. Various roles designed by the artist for the participants of this project were, to a large degree, its condition. Janin, in her disguise, observing the burying of her other self (game character, 'avatar') could come closer to the inaccessible experience of her own non-being. Her family could face the fear and try to "domesticate death".⁹ The members of the art world, experiencing the whole situation 'for real', made the frames of fiction almost invisible; they guaranteed the 'reality' element of the 'show'. The artist – masked – present and absent – acted as a game master. She 'put play into play', designed the roles and the basic script, created and led the game, but she was also 'played' by this game, unable to predict how the actual events would unfold.

The function of the game master thus releases the artist from the pressure of being the only person in charge – the 'author' – who determines all moves

from the initial idea to the final performance. The participants embody the plan and fill it with different meanings, transgress the singular point of view, often surprise the artist-initiator – and potentially transform his/her own game into a common experience.

Neither king nor jack

The artist-game master is neither the highest authority nor the average player. He or she is an expert within the game-world – his or her invention or appropriation. In a way it is an exclusive expertise – the command of rules that might be yet not invented and the instinctive knowledge of the possible scenarios. However, the action always takes place at the borders – somewhere in between art and life, the plan and the enactment, the intention and interpretation that occurs in the 'real world'. The 'expert' in a particular game may turn out a layman within the non-art reality or an incompetent group leader, unprepared to face the complex ethical questions that belong to the 'real' life and the particular domain the artist chooses to explore. The incompetence can have, however, various manifestations and hidden agendas. It can be simply the tactic to let go and see what happens, as expressed by Jeremy Deller in reference to his project *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001, "I was interested in how other people would interpret the idea, where it would go to. I knew it had its own life. I had no ownership over it"¹⁰. It can also be a didactic tool, utilised in various 'community workshops' where the participants are encouraged to take the initiative, discuss their own needs as a group and design the activities accordingly.

The approach to an artist as a 'game master' automatically discloses all possible variations of this function – from the authoritarian gestures to subversion or empathy. It is clear from the beginning that the person named as the artist performs a 'mastery' but within the frame that can be negotiated. Nonetheless, even in the most 'democratic' projects the grain of mastery – leadership/authority/responsibility – remains untouched and it cannot be removed if we want to treat these projects as art. The function of the game master is inevitably loaded with authorial power which, in my view, is desirable, although it might be disturbing in the era

⁸ Kaprow (2003: 1, 104, 125).

⁹ www.janin.art.pl/english/index_en.htm, viewed on 15 March 2010.

¹⁰ In Doherty (2004: 94).

of 'social' or 'ethical' turn in art and the self-sacrifice of the author.

A joker

Game master is a figure of the borders, someone at once inside and outside the game – the creative act and the particular 'game world'. The joker can replace other cards but it does not belong to any suit; it can be neutral, beneficial or to be avoided. Being an outsider allows to approach the situation from the unexpected angle, see things in a fresh way, open-mindedly and unconventionally. Being a player/educator in play – not in purposeful real life activities – gives an artist a large scope of freedom. However, as Frank Wedekind used to say (from his own experience), this freedom reveals "in the licence given the artist to be a mad outsider, exempt from society's normal behaviour" whose role is considered "utterly insignificant, more tolerated than accepted".¹¹ From the outcast to the scapegoat or the 'Pied Piper', the role of the artist-game master is to question the status quo, lead the others outside the 'city walls' into the joyful exploration of the unknown. On the other hand the artists 'role-play' or gradually become 'useful' society members providing community services such as workshops for children or the unemployed, family events, collective activities for the neighbourhoods, parades or meals. The artists as assimilated community workers lose the ability to stir up – they simply smooth over the 'relational fabric'. The effective game master seems to be the one who can balance between these distant identifications, between the position of a detached outsider, an external voice of wisdom (or ignorance) and the position of a hired animator of the communal entertainment or education, according to the given political or social agenda.

Artists-game masters organize, initiate, animate, coordinate and provoke situations and actions that are promised as open-ended and allow for viewers/participants' initiative, intervention and choice. Who are they? Spontaneous playmates open for the democratic negotiation of rules or disguised masters in a quite traditional sense who, like Rirkrit Tiravanija apply the phrase 'many people' among other names of materials utilised to create an artwork. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the ambiguity of game master's role, as both: an educator

and a player; a community leader and an outsider; a potential 'authority' and a jester; an entrepreneur and a vagabond – constitutes the elusive 'essence' of artistic occupation. Perhaps this 'undecidability' is the crucial factor enabling to locate the more or less functional community events, initiated by the artist-game master, on the side of art.

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¹¹ Goldberg (1988: 52).

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Witkacy – a perfect trickster

Many artists have always played and play all the time a role of trickster – a person who is against settled rules and everyday order. It is simply imprinted in an artist's status. Now we can observe a great comeback of that stereotype – perhaps mainly thank fantasy literature and a popularity of Role Playing Games.

A fine example of such a person surely was a great Polish artist, philosopher, playwright, novelist, photographer and art theorist, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (aka Witkacy, 1885–1939). His peers saw him as a very strange man. He was even commonly called “a madman from Krupówki” (Krupówki is the main street in Zakopane, where he lived), who was wearing not an elegant suit or a fashionable sport uniform but a home-knitted sweater in striking violet and orange strips – completely out of fashion at that time. He usually behaved provocatively and made strange grimaces in public places. He loved to play many roles and asked his friends to take his pictures in them: as Napoleon with a stony face (ill. 1) or as a Hollywood star in a cowboy hat (ill. 2) and as a hoodlum in a nasty cap, as a judge in a robe and as a ghost in a white shirt over his head (ill. 3). He arranged scenes of rape and injected drugs to somebody. Everything

was documented by excellent photographs.¹ The artist invented his own worlds and was trying to created them all the time.

Witkacy was also known as a great womanizer and an adventurer. He was a fan of shocking: liberated dogs from their chains and greeted his guests naked.

„[...] he was never at rest, always tense, tormenting himself and others with his continuous acting, his desire to shock and to hold other people's attention, playing with people cruelly and painfully [...]” – Witold Gombrowicz wrote about Witkacy.² And Edyta Gałuszkowa-Sicińska remembered: „for instance, out of the blue, during a normal conversation, he imitated a tipsy officer of the Tzar's bodyguards proposing to a lady in an eastern dialect... or in Boy-Żeleński's voice abused an unfaithful mistress”.³ During a visit in friends' home he entered a closet and imitated a starveling who squeaks for a slice of bread. In a restaurant he put a big steak with a poached egg into his wallet, which appalled his companions and scandalized waiters. He used

¹ See photographs reproduced in: Franczak, Okołowicz 1986.

² Gombrowicz (1982: 115).

³ Gałuszkowa-Sicińska (1947).

⁴ After Krystyna Głogowska, quoted in: Franczak, Okołowicz (1986: 31).



Ill. 1. Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz) in one of his particular roles: as Napoleon, c. 1937, photo: Tadeusz Langier, collection of Ewa Franczak and Stefan Okołowicz

to parody many of his friends – Karol Szymanowski, Artur Rubinstein, Andrzej Strug, and Józef Piłsudski and Napoleon as well. Once „uninvited, he used to get up from the dinner table, put a half of a black comb above his upper lip and yell in German imitating Adolf Hitler”.⁴ In the house of Roman Jasiński’s parents, „after coffee he ran on all fours to the drawing room where he sat at the piano and played his entire repertoire, including *A Menuet Composed on the Pacific Ocean* and a waltz *Sorrow for the Life Passing Irretrievably* (his own composition!), and ended with some horrid improvisation (cheers!)”⁵. In Maria Kasprowicz’s house at Harenda, before an imminent storm „he put his hand to his mouth and as if from afar, from the depth of a black night, began to wail in a drunken highlander drawl, long and trailing, then he stopped this song for a while and began to moan like the wind and bark in a muffled way as it from afar, from the depth of Olczańska Valley...”⁶ Alicja Dryszkiewicz

⁴ ?????????????????

⁵ Jasiński (1957: 311).

⁶ Worcell (1982: 25).



Ill. 2. Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz) in one of his particular roles: as a Hollywood film star, c. 1927, J. Kępińska Studio in Zakopane, collection of Ewa Franczak and Stefan Okołowicz

remembered: „What appalled me in Staś [Witkacy], was his howling in the evening, on the slope of Antałówka hill. All dogs from the neighbourhood joined this really wolf’s performance. Staś drawled together with them – his face became wolf-like, with his teeth bared, his eyes blinking or closed. I think he used to forget he was the man. After this performance he was pale and perspiring. I told him – take care, for one day you will change into a wolf and run – you will not know where and why. What did he think about then? What did ail him – or please him – I had the impression then I was quite sure of it that the dogs understood him. [...] It was not just a game with dogs, it was really a sort of a mysterious rite.”⁷

In 1925 Witkacy gave up oil paintings and devoted himself exclusively to executing portraits as created by him a one-man company called „S.I. Witkiewicz” Portrait Firm. The Firm executed unified

⁷ Dryszkiewicz (1982).



Ill. 3. Witkacy (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz) in one of his particular roles: in a judge's gown, 1930s., collection of Ewa Franczak and Stefan Okołowicz

portraits with pastels on paper strictly under rules of *The Regulation* invented by the artist and took charges enumerated in *The Price List*. There were four basic types of portraits: A (hyper-realistic), B (realistic), C (expressive, so called Pure Form, for friends only, often under an influence of alcohol and/or drugs, priceless) and D (similar to the type C, but without artificial means). The Firm had many clients and we think that until his death in 1939 Witkacy executed ca. 7 000 portraits. Quite often Witkacy didn't observe his own rules. So it was the case of the realization of untypical commission of the portrait of Maryla Grossmanowa, known today as *Falsehood of a Woman* from 1927 (ill. 4). The work depicts an image of the sitter in her whole figure, laying against a fantastic landscape, with a cat at her feet and also contains the artist's self-portrait presenting him during executing the portrait. But Witkacy is looking towards an audience with a roguish smile and showing his left fist hidden behind his back.

What's the matter?

From Witkacy's letters to his mother we know that the artist took the commission without pleas-

ure. He was encouraged only by relatively high salary (500 zlotys – two times more than the most expensive portrait executed by Firm and also two times more than typical monthly salary at that time in Poland).⁸ But the artist simply had to underline his independence from the rich client's request. So Witkacy put an additional significance into the scene. The proper portrait was executed in the type A („licked out” – hyper realistic, in *The Regulation*: „...suited more to women's rather than men's faces. Executed in a rather „polished” style, with a certain loss of accuracy for the sake of rendering the sitter more beautiful, with a certain degree „prettiness”). On the contrary – the portrait „inside” the work, visible on the easel on the second plan represents the type D (like in the type C „the sitter's traits are treated subjectively, possibly with grotesque, formal or psychological enhancement of feature. Approaching the border of an abstract composition, or so-called Pure Form but without support of any artificial substances”).⁹ It depicts an expressively deformed woman's face and it is in fact not a portrait of her but a composition created independently and following a Witkacy's own theory of art – a theory of the Pure Form¹⁰. In this way the artist not only demonstrated his thinking about whimsical and false, two-faced women, but also presented conventionality of the whole process of creation, where an effect depends on a convention taken. Putting two different portraits of one person into one composition presents a multi-level game of conventions, consciously denudes all the swindle of art and does not allow us to believe that the artist wants to depict the world faithfully even if he paints it in a realistic style. Each artist invents world and creates it all the time following only his own rules. The Witkacy's composition entitled *Falsehood of a Woman* is a crossing of two or more worlds and we will never know which of them is the real one. And also we will never know which portrait (A or D) is the proper one. Does the fine dressed woman hide a wild, malicious beast with deformed face inside her? Perhaps it was only the smart artist's joke and revenge because of the unwanted but very payable commission. At the same time Witkacy presented not only to his client-sit-

⁸ Published by Anna Micińska (1996: 282–309).

⁹ The genuine *Regulation of „S.I. Witkiewicz” Portrait Firm* of 1928 is in the collection of Museum of Central Pomerania in Słupsk.

¹⁰ Witkiewicz (1919).



III. 4. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Falsehood of a Woman - Self-portrait with Maryla Grossmanowa*, 1927, crayon, The National Museum in Warsaw



III. 5. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Die Athleten haben immer Recht* (Athletes are always right), 1922, watercolor, private collection

ter but also to all of us that there is a possibility of shaping surrounding reality in many ways and an artist-creator can do it on his own.

But we have to remember that an artist not only understands wild beasts and women as well but also can see many things in his contemporary world before other people. Gertrude Stein stressed that in 1938 in her essay on Picasso.¹¹

Apart from his superficial clownery, Witkacy traced not only changes in contemporary art but also a political situation in Europe very carefully. In 1922 he already saw a possible future danger as a consequence of the Treaty of Rapallo (signed 16th of April 1922) setting normal diplomatic relations between Germany and Russia. The artist knew very well that Poland was a very weak partner for them both, additionally – situated in between... Witkacy – especially after his personal experience during the first world war¹² – foreseeing a later *Weltkatastrophe* very early felt a great fear and wrote about it

¹¹ Stein (1974: 54).

¹² Years 1914–1918 Witkacy spent in Russia and as an officer Tzar's army participated in the war (in July of 1916 was seriously hurt in the battle between the Styr and Stochod rivers in the West Ukraine). The artist also witnessed the Revolution of 1917 in St Petersburg.

in his literary works and letters to his mother, wife and friends.¹³ He expressed these feelings also in his gouache composition executed in 1922 entitled *Die Athleten haben immer Recht* (ill. 5). This work certainly is a tricky metaphor of the situation. It depicts a great blue monster crushing a much smaller naked woman. Certainly this scene is also connected with the artist's interest of an eternal struggle of two sexes but symbolical meaning prevails. The German title isn't accidental.

A catastrophic vision of the future Witkacy expressed in his theoretical and literary writings first. He understood very well an impact of scientific discoveries, technical development and a growing role of various machines in a human life for an art. He saw all that as announcements of an approach of death of so-called high culture and a risk of changing it into mass-culture¹⁴. He saw gradual disappearing of metaphysic feelings which were in his opinion a basic source for any form of art. He wrote about it and devoted to this problem the fourth part of his theoretical work on the Pure Form.¹⁵ In a popular version Witkacy expressed his thought in a funny and also slightly bitter short poem:

My works won't go under thatches,
Because no thatch will be here anymore,
And also it will be no fun for anyone,
Dirt only will creep everywhere.

Witkacy died on 18th of September 1939 committing suicide the day after the Red Army had intruded Poland from the east. Over 70 years later we can see that his prophecy mostly came to life. Pop-culture spread over and replaced high culture in everyday life. But at the same time we can see that Witkacy's works are also vivid – paintings, drawings and photographs are exhibited quite often, theatres produce his dramas, novels and theoretical writings are published, conferences devoted to his life and work are organized in Poland and abroad as well.¹⁶ But sometimes we have an impression that Witkacy himself is still alive and paints, draws and writes all the time. From time to time unknown portraits or other compositions appear on the art market or in

private collections. Somebody finds the artist's unknown letters or other writings.

All of us remember the thrilling event of 1988 when remnants of an unknown young woman instead of Witkacy's dead body were exhumed from the cemetery in Jeziory [Velyki Oзера, Ukraine] and brought into Poland to bury them in Zakopane. But he also makes much smaller and less thrilling jokes all the time. Witkacy's great admirer and editor of his writings, professor Janusz Degler once finished his work on preparing a selection of the artist's pieces and left all the material in a theatre cloakroom. He couldn't find it after spectacle. The file disappeared and nobody could find out what had happened. But somebody saw a tall, handsome man in an old-fashion hat in a foyer of the theatre a while before...

My own experiences were equally mysterious but much more pleasant. A few weeks after a conference devoted to Witkacy in May of 1993 in St. Petersburg where I had delivered a paper on the artist's astronomical compositions somebody left a huge bunch of 33 my favorite red roses for me at the reception of the National Museum where I worked. Some time after that I found several books (devoted to Witkacy or connected with him) at the door of my flat. Nobody has never confessed to the gifts. Getting news about unknown portraits and other works are almost everyday practice... Of course they do not allow to leave him and encourage me to continue my exploration of his life and work all the time.

So Witkacy seems to be a perfect trickster, doesn't he? And I believe he will never stop to be.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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The demilitarization of language: a serious musical concern.

John Cage's trickster strategy in *Empty Words*

In the 1957 agenda *Experimental Music* John Cage writes: "And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord."¹ Before, however, Cage, under the influence of Zen and Eastern philosophy, art theory (especially T.D. Suzuki and Ananda Coomaraswamy) dispenses with modernist-romantic paradigm of art – importing its function to communicate emotional states and states of affairs, and is satisfied that the essence of musical works should be to „release notes” and make the listener face „real life” – he proceeds through a kind of spiritual transformation. The first reason for „rupture” with tradition is when, intended to convey sadness, „au-

tobiographical” work *Perilous Night* – a story of misfortune and pain resulting from a failed sex life and the loneliness and terror experienced by a man in the face of the loss of bonds – induces laughter in the audience. It leads Cage to a more general reflection on the contemporary society and the communication crisis that is digesting it ²: *Since words, when they communicate, have no effect, it dawns on us that we need a society in which communication is not practiced, in which words become nonsense as they do between lovers, in which words become what they originally were: trees and stars and the rest of primeval environment. The demilitarization of language: a serious musical concern.*³

Empty Words

An example of the work, in which Cage undertakes the realization of such eccentrically formulated aesthetic idea (the demilitarization of language) is the text of *Empty Words* (1973–1974), created through a random conversion of excerpts from Henry David Thoreau's *Journal*⁴. The very design of the text is

¹ Cage (1961: 12).

² The time period when most of Cage's creative activity took place includes the early phase of the Cold War in the 1950s, then the war in Vietnam and the student revolts of the 60's.

³ Cage (1979: 184).

⁴ H. D. Thoreau is an author that appears in the context of a few other of Cage's works, for example *Song Books* (1970),

significant. It is constructed of four parts, and as it progresses, it becomes more and more fragmented. The first part consists of individual phrases, words, syllables and letters selected at random from the thirteen volumes of diaries written by *Walden's* author, the second contains only single words, and the third is limited to random clusters of phonemes. In the fourth part we do not come across anything resembling any known form of linguistic communication, with the exception of single letters and moments of silence, which together form the vocalization of the work: clear sound.

According to Kutnik, Cage's writing method in *Empty Words* is based on the fact that it uses Thoreau's text „as the source of verbal and topographic sound material, treating it as a non-hierarchical set of items of equal worth to prioritize in a completely arbitrary (i.e. unintentional) manner, without the need to preserve the internal structural relationships and dependencies that exist in the original”, and that completely broken down are „logical and grammatical (semantic and syntactic) relationships that determine the ability of language to communicate meaning”⁵. Allen S. Weiss, in turn, points out that this peculiar „trajectory of textual disintegration” refers to the word formation strategy built on the basis of achievements, on the one hand, modern linguistics (in particular the phonetic analysis and Jakobson's morphemic structure of language), and on the other hand modern poetry (from Zaum, Joyce's Dadaism, through Lettrism, Fluxus and concrete poetry), adding to the aesthetics of a kind of ethical imperative, namely to release language from the domination of the syntax so as to liberate the meaning, sound and form from figures of thought imposed from above⁶. The impact of Dadaism can be seen in *Empty Words* at a first glance, the more so because Cage described himself as an heir to Tobey and Duchamp⁷. Dada as a „state of mind” (the term from Richard Hulsenbeck's 1918 manifesto), more than a purely artistic movement, as anti-art, stressed the importance of chaos, irrationality, chance, and absurd, seeing in them the trait of humanism, drawing attention to the falseness and danger of stagnant morals, politics and art⁸.

Cage's relationships with Dadaism may not be so obvious, were it not for his longtime acquaintance with Duchamp, which turned into a close intimacy at the end of life of *Fountain's* author. When after the death of *Fountain's* author's in 1968, Cage was asked to create a work dedicated to his friend's memory, he created a series of lithographs and a set of eight Plexiglas plates covered with words, fragments of words and single letters selected at random from the dictionary. The piece entitled *Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel* does not convey any intended content and cannot be considered as referring to any other text. Kutnik writes: „Verbal material is used here only as an element of visual space, although the lack of a clearly identified reference dimension, paradoxically, makes the work much more *eloquent*, than would a conventional eulogy or elegy”⁹. This „eloquent” silence, apart from the overt repetition of „dada gesture,” points to something that will become Cage's trademark: a new author's attitude in relation to works and a new concept of reception. According to it the work of art is understood as a place „to merge horizons” of the creator and the recipient and reaches its final shape as a result of recipient's meaning creating inventiveness. This assumption also fits the more general aesthetic strategy, allowing the sounds and letters to obtain full autonomy and identity by loosening their links (or by a complete break) with imposed systems, theories, and „Beethovens.” And all of this to release contents previously unspoken by the receiver (as a result of binding by numerous „corsets”), often quite „eloquent.” Let's return for the moment to *Empty Words*. Cage's instructions for the performer of the work sound quite succinctly: “A new breath for each new event... Making music by reading out loud. *To read. To breathe. IV: equation between letters and silence. Making language saying nothing at all.*”¹⁰ The most important seems to be the original strategy of „filling time”, reminiscent of Buddhist meditation (based on control of breathing and the free movement of air)¹¹ and a turn towards a new „musical” quality of language, reminiscent of the Heideggerian „language

Mureau [Music of Thoreau] (1970), *Essay* (1988).

⁵ Kutnik (1993: 86).

⁶ Weiss (2006).

⁷ Cage, Retallack (1996: 101–103).

⁸ Morawski (1976).

⁹ Kutnik (1993: 84–85).

¹⁰ Pritchett (1994: 1).

¹¹ As in Cage's famous koan: “If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.” See:

Cage (1961: 93).

of being”, and establishing the function of the language to be the generation of sound and creation of a pseudo melodic line.

Perceiving the sound of meaning

The creative linguistic strategy proposed by Cage, based on the renunciation of semantic context, is in opposition to these concepts of language, which reduce it to structure and content. These concepts are not aware; however, of an obvious dimension of language experience, namely, its pitch. It is an irrefutable fact that both the tone and mood to a large extent determine the significance of what is spoken. People react in the first place to the pitch addressed to them, and then try to capture the content of speech. Not everything can be said with a raised voice, just as some things can only be whispered, while others require a calm voice. Moving along the same path, Martin Heidegger argued that the term „speech”, similarly to the equally fundamental to his philosophy *Dasein*¹², are somewhat blurred. „This, what is *Dasein*, depends on *how* it is, that is, *how* it exists.¹³ „Speech” also, and it has always been *Dasein*’s speech – serves Heidegger to describe linguistic behaviors, which only slightly differ from the very *existence* of the speaker. Man exists in a „pronounced” manner, and human behavior is „pronounced”. The conventional meaning of „existence” and „speaking” is blurred here. Continuing the idea further, Heidegger says that talking is tantamount to hearing. Psychological interpretation of this observation is given by one of the commentators of the author of *Being and Time*, and it is very much in Cage’s spirit: „The speech of *Dasein* (...) consists of not only what I say, but also what I hear. The sounds that reach me (a dog barking in the backyard, a mass on the radio that my next-door neighbor is listening to), articulate the world: my place of being. Listening to these sounds I hear in the end my own existence: I am someone who lives in this backyard, in a country where the old women on Sunday listen to a Catholic Mass on the radio”¹⁴ Cage no doubt would agree with the author of this statement, who repeats after Heidegger: “The man inherently knows how to listen, and this ability denotes our primal openness “ to Being of

beings; however, as to how to listen, there is no consent. Rymkiewicz: “This example allows us to say the following: contrary to the claims of physiology and acoustics, we hear the meaning, rather than individual sounds. Barking of the dog is immediately the barking of the dog, and only secondarily may be treated as a sound wave striking the drums of my ear. That’s why, when listening to music [to be accurate: reflective music, for example, the song *Ebony* from Sartre’s *Nausea* – editor: JL], we hear a melody at once – that is a sensible whole that arranges the sounds – rather than individual tones, which we then assemble into the whole. The sum of all of these audible wholes and the significance of all these audible meanings – this is my *Dasein*: the always audible presence.”¹⁵ Only on the surface Cage argues for the exact opposite. Although his position is activist and contingent, as a matter of fact it remains metaphysical. He believes that although hearing is a disposition inherent to our being in the world; disposition, which should be formed (through training and meditation), he also claims that it is shaped by the environment without the participation of consciousness. Cage rejects the situation of conventional melody (“Beethoven”), in which *Dasein* hearing is directed towards the meanings, because this situation is somewhat forced, designed, modeled, and because of this detached from life – the proverbial “ivory tower”. In his opinion, only through contact with the sounds devoid of designates (such as urban audiosphere) or such, which designates we are not able to grasp, although objectively they exist – *Dasein* experiences the true nature of reality, while also being shaped by it (Phono-formed). This experience is the supreme value in Cage’s ethical and aesthetic system.

Opening to the sound

Cage’s aesthetic strategy is striving to ensure that listening, this original “openness of being”, does not realize itself through the establishment of meanings, but is based on a primal human disposition that is “listening skills”. Cage’s turn towards audiosphere is revealed in the majority of his compositions from the period of interpretative aleatorism (*Concerto*, *Atlas*, *Empty Words*), primarily in *tape works* – sound collages, created from pieces of tapes glued together, which lengths are determined by

¹² *Dasein* – being, human being

¹³ Rymkiewicz (2002: 77–78).

¹⁴ Rymkiewicz (2002: 134).

¹⁵ Rymkiewicz (2002: 134–135).

random operations. Among the sounds recorded on tape can be found: the sounds of the city, sounds of the countryside, electronic sounds, the sounds produced by hand (manually-produced sounds), including instrumental music, sounds generated on the basis of breath (wind-produced sounds), including singing and so called small sounds, so quiet and subtle, that to hear them, they should be given a microphone and amplification. An example of “works on tape” are, among others, *Williams Mix* (1952–1953), *Fontana Mix* (1958), *Song books* (1970), *Etcetera* (1973), *Roaratorio, an Irish circus on Finnegans Wake* (1979). In these works, Cage seeks to gradually deprive audible sounds of their signification designates and, consequently, to deprive them of meaning. This is accompanied with encouragement to focus on “sounds alone.” The experience offered to his listeners by Cage is of an intuitive and affective character. Dick Higgins calls it “eroticism of fusion” – its result should be a “merging of horizons”, a variant of *flow*, in which the artist and the recipient reach a state of anarchic harmony, creating (unintentionally) a type of an anarchist society in miniature¹⁶. Cage through the creation of his acousmatic compositions desires that in the face of something that only requires acceptance, the „always audible presence” directed towards the „wholeness of audible meanings” was pushed out of balance, deprived of confidence and stable ground. Cage refers here to Suzuki, who claims that the Man of the West must say *something*, he must theorize or intellectualize about his specific experience, must originate from the sphere of feeling toward a series of analysis.¹⁷ In accordance with Cage’s instructions, *Empty Words* reading time should be measured out (the calculations including half-hour breaks between each part), so that the last part begins with the advent of dawn. Then all the doors and windows are to be opened, allowing the sounds of the morning to sneak into the room. Or rather, for our ears to penetrate to the outside. When James Pritchett, author of *The Music of John Cage*, listening to a song performed live by Cage on the radio, following the author’s instructions, he experiences a kind of mystical revelation and notes: “When Cage performed such a reading over the radio in 1981, I did as he suggested in my own apartment. The bird songs mingled with his own

vocalizations — inside and out, everyone was singing together.”¹⁸ When Christopher Fox’s voice reading the fourth part of *Empty Words* in an almost completely deserted St. Paul’s Hall, begins to mix with the refreshing breeze of dawn on Saturday February 4, 2006 in Huddersfield in York County, similar (though not equivalent) experience accompanies the author of this dissertation.

Empty Words – live

The best known, presented by Cage and recorded on tape, performance of *Empty Words* was held in December 1977 at the Teatro Lirico in Milan.¹⁹ Over four hours long recording, in which Cage reads the third and fourth part of the work, is full of surprising effects. Initially, Cage’s rhythmic and steady voice, chanting fragmented words, single letter and letter clusters created at random, is accompanied with a mood of silence and concentration within the audience. However, over time, in response to the incomprehensible message coming from the scene, sounds of impatience, shouts of disapproval, ostentatious coughing as well as loud attempts to quiet the “intruders” move to the foreground. After more or less half an hour shouts turn into a continuous, uninterrupted, cacophonous clamor from which you can pick out the sounds of laughter, shouts, jeers, whistles, curses, insults, demonstrations of indignation, the buzz of conversations, arguments, yawning, humming, steps, and loud demonstrations of political views, choral singing, the sounds of bickering, and from time to time, rhythmic clapping and stomping. Thoughtful, precise and devoid of expression voice of Cage reading the text is barely audible, to some extent drowned out by the somewhat primitive expression of spontaneously responding audience. Our attention is diverted from John Cage, author and performer, and instead our ears are directed towards the accompanying environment. Over the next three and a half hour of recording, the leading role of the performance (lecture? concert?) is played by the gathered in the theater audience. The audience is in the centre of the stage, and the most we learn from the recording is about them. We are privy to the prevailing atmosphere of admirers of Italian experimental art in the second half of the 70s (it can

¹⁶ Haskins (n.d.).

¹⁷ Suzuki (1956).

¹⁸ Pritchett (1994: 2).

¹⁹ Cage (2006).

be with some degree of probability assumed that such a crowd was in the audience), what people are arguing about, what political views they held, what was fashionable; we recognize different kinds of temperaments and learn what then antagonized the audience, as well as made it laugh, uncomfortable, angry. What we hear is the result of Cage's fully intended procedure. „However, chance operations are not mysterious sources of >>the right answers<<. They are a means of (...) freeing the ego from its taste and memory, its concern for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has chance to enter into the ego's own experience.”²⁰ „Demilitarization of language” – the release of language from prison of syntax and meaning-creating duty, in Cage's thought is united with the ideals of individual freedom, „the silencing of the ego,” conflict-free interpretation of reality (Buddhism) and the attitude of renunciation of force and nonviolence. The compulsion to create meaningful linguistic communication is transferred from the artist to the audience, which completely surprised by this turn of events, reacts with fear, disgust, and finally violence. Some viewers (listeners) stubbornly demand a refund of money for the tickets – curses and threats are uttered – because they do not accept a situation in which they are turned into the main character. After all, they didn't pay for someone leaving them to themselves, but for someone to be “occupied” by them, someone to “occupy” them, someone to show them the way, give meaning to their “being in the theatre”. They do not accept a situation in which the value of traditional language communication is removed and instead of content they receive a free space to fill and how they would do this depends only on their own inventiveness. This situation causes impatience in them, a kind of panic, similar to the one experienced by Willy in Beckett's *Happy days*: „The fear so great, Certain days, of finding oneself... left, with hours still to run, before the bell for sleep, and nothing more to say, and nothing more to do”²¹ (Beckett, 1976:27). Surprisingly, however, after some time, a part of the audience relaxes. A new situation begins to produce positive emotions. People full of joyous creativity seem willing to take advantage of the opportunities given and simply manifest their presence. Perhaps the places where

they ordinarily reside not give them such opportunities. School, work, home, street, impose upon them the obligation of standardization, rationalization and authority and exercise boundless control over them. Perhaps their being in the theater, „being-in-the-world”, leads to a decision to treat it as an opportunity and a blessing. Suddenly, they cease to be frightened by the time spent singing, shouting ceases and generating a variety of strange sounds that do not resemble any known form of rational communication, but are a satire of traditional communication and aesthetic convention. In fact, they are much more than satire – they are an encouragement to creatively rethink the human life and the spontaneous rejection of the rules guiding it. In the name of free space-time continuum, trickster's trick, anarchistic fun, purposeless play and meaningless phrases.

Trickster's Indeterminacy

Cage's concept from the period of *Chance & Indeterminacy* – based on the introduction of indeterminacy to the compositions, both in structural and executive terms – is aimed in the opposite direction to the effort of the modernist artist and has trickster's fancy dress. Remembering that “tricksters achieve their objectives through indirection and mask-wearing, through playing upon the gullibility of their opponents”²², Cage wants to remove artist's personality from the creative process, so that his ego, the whole “artistic” reservoir that may indicate the subjectivist nature of the resulting work, had no effect on its final shape. “New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words. Just an attention to the activity of sounds”²³ – writes Cage in the *Experimental Music* (1957), announcing, as it were, the direction of his future accomplishments. “While frequently humorous, trickster tales often convey serious social critiques”²⁴ – the target of Cage's musical anarchism is revealed this way, and it is: striving for the elimination of the intentional element of the creative process and to show the fullness of sound as natural phenomena of material reality, without assigning to them any-

²⁰ Cage (1979: 5).

²¹ Beckett (1976).

²² Harris (n.d.).

²³ Cage (1961: 10).

²⁴ Harris (n.d.).

thing that would go beyond the quality of sound. As Cage remarked in conversation with Morton Feldman: "I think one of the things that has happened is that it's become clear that we can be — not just with our minds but with our whole being — responsive to sound, and that that sound doesn't have to be the communication of some deep thought. It can be just a sound."²⁵

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²⁵ Pritchett (1994: 5).

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Tricksters in Poznań: Penerstwo and The Krasnals*

The juxtaposition of two so different groups, which belong to the young Poznań art scene, may appear a strange or even an irritating idea. In order to turn irritation into interest, I propose to look at this juxtaposition through the concept of *trickster*. It gives a methodological and theoretical framework to this risky and, at the same time, intriguing comparative endeavor, which in itself seems to be a sort of *trickstering* or 'rascality' in the field of art history. In addition, it is actually based on a rumor, since there is neither confirmation nor strong scientific evidence based on 'fieldwork' that The Krasnals come from Poznań. The aim of the article is to explore the activity and representations of two groups, Penerstwo and The Krasnals, in the context of their use of *trickster* tactics. This theoretical framework is used not only to grasp the similarities between the activities of 'a loose collective'¹ Penerstwo and the

integrated actions of The Krasnals, but above all, to show the differences discernible in their strategies.²

Over the span of the last sixty years the figure of the *trickster* 'got settled' for good in the humanities; it helped to deconstruct received norms and the predominant order as well as to reveal its hidden, often oppressive mechanisms.³ The role of *trickster* is then to break rules, to provoke, to mock and to act on the borders of widely accepted norms or even

² The aim of the article is not to represent the whole of artistic achievements of both groups, but to look at their activity through the prism of the concept of *trickster*.

³ See: Hynes and Doty (1997). In this publication one may find dossier of research on *trickster* figure and its functioning in the humanistic studies. When at the end of the 18th century the term appeared in the English dictionary it meant a swindler. In its contemporary meaning, it has been functioning since the end of the 19th century, when it was used in relation to literary figures, which originated, first of all, from tales of Native Americans of North America as well as from the African context (p.14). The author of the first description of this phenomenon was an American archeologist and ethnologist Daniel G. Brinton, who in 1876, analyzed the figure of Koyote in Native American tales, however, without the use of the concept of *trickster*. The first use of the term *trickster*, in all likelihood, may be credited to German-English anthropologist Franz Boas, who in 1898 published a book on Native American legends. The concept got popularized from the middle of 1950s onwards, when the book *The Trickster* by anthropologist Paul Radin as well as the famous article 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure' by Carl Gustav Jung were published. Compare: Müller (2009: 11).

* This text was published in Polish in: Makowiecki (2011: 134–145).

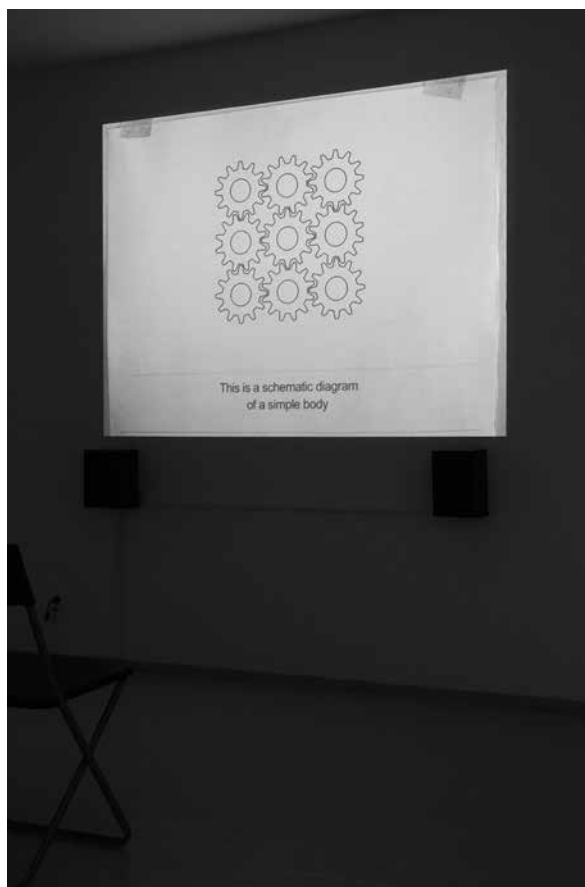
¹ Members of Penerstwo at every opportunity emphasize that 'Penerstwo is not any phalanx, but just a loose collective of independent personalities'. After: Szablowski (2010: 133). The group started its activity in 2007, its members are: Wojciech Bąkowski, Piotr Bosacki, Tomasz Mróz, Konrad Smoleński, Magda Starska, Radek Szlaga, Iza Tarasewicz.

to transgress them ostentatiously. Having defined *trickster* as an embodiment of creativity⁴, rebel and ambiguity it is hard to resist the temptation not to look at both Penerstwo and The Krasnals through this prism, which is scientifically legitimated and provoking at the same time. This perspective also allows an art historian to indulge in the pleasure of 'romping', paradoxically, still within the safe boundaries of the discipline, which has become more and more open and flexible.

From Pener to trickster

According to Michał Lasota and Zuzanna Hadryś: 'The aesthetics of Pener, in a nutshell, is characterized by directness of message, brutality, 'dirt' and, at the same time, huge sensitivity and blunt and intuitive language; it is fresh and imaginative as it emerges on the margins of dominant discourses. Thanks to its originality, however, it gets through them.'⁵ In the article 'Penerstwo', Piotr Bosacki states that an informal manifesto of a Pener's attitude is founded on 'a kind of peculiar disarray in the sphere of customs', the most important part of this activity is strong expression, 'The expression takes the shape of rudeness. The aim, however, is not to do evil, and this is the most crucial thing in Penerstwo'⁶ (ill. 1). Another member of this loose collective, Wojciech Bąkowski, defines pener's condition as 'a sensitive loutishness'⁷ and describes it as follows: 'Penerstwo is a life. A simple, great life. (...) A combination of pigsty, mess, pomp, pathos, fragility and weakness.'⁸

Therefore, any attempt to give a precise definition of Penerstwo is, in fact, doomed to fail. In this context, oxymorons and constructions based on paradoxes turn out to be the most pertinent. Pener is then at the same time an embodiment of loutishness and sensitivity, of brutality and tenderness, of rudeness and gentleness. Due to this



Ill. 1. Piotr Bosacki, *Love of life*, 2011, an exhibition view, courtesy of the Galeria Stereo (Stereo Gallery), Poznań

fact he slips from unambiguous identifications as well as the answer to the question whether he is closer to good or evil. As Sabina Sokołowska notes, a narrator in the Bąkowski's movie 'Are you coming along? Where? To the middle of fucking nowhere' 2008 is neither good nor bad⁹ (ill. 2). According to Marta Kosińska, when we scrutinize Penerstwo we should abandon all dichotomies¹⁰. In many respects, it bears a resemblance to *trickster*, who moves between the opposite poles and, at the same time, belongs to none of them, acting beyond a dualistic perspective and any categorization based on the distinction positive vs. negative.¹¹ Penerstwo, like *trickster*, plays with different kinds of boundaries; describing its attitude it uses ambiguity as well as paradoxical and oxymoronic structures. As Una Hellwig remarks: '*trickster* is a paradox in itself'¹². According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, we can define

⁴ William J. Hynes calls *trickster* 'an agent of creativity'. See: Doty and Hynes (1997: 211). In the same publication on page 34 Hynes, with reservation that not all *tricksters* have to be characterized by all of them, enumerates six basic features of *trickster*: 1) the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality, 2) deceiver/trick-player, 3) shape-shifter, 4) situation-inventor, 5) messenger/imitator of the gods, 6) sacred/lewd bricoleur.

⁵ Lasota, Hadryś (2008: 20).

⁶ Bosacki (2010: 153–154).

⁷ After Szablowski (2010: 131).

⁸ Lasota (2009: 99).

⁹ Sokołowska (2008).

¹⁰ Kosińska (2007).

¹¹ Hellwig (2009: 27, 34).

¹² Hellwig (2009: 64).



Ill. 2. Wojciech Bąkowski, *Talking Movie 4*, 2009, a still from a cartoon movie, courtesy of the Galeria Stereo (Stereo Gallery), Poznań

him as a mediator of oppositions¹³, which undoubtedly also neatly renders the attitude (or maybe attitudes?) of the loose collective from Poznań and fits its ideological motto of 'a sensitive loutishness'.

Penerstwo comes from a specific city; 'Poznańness' is strongly emphasized¹⁴ as constitutive for its patchwork identity¹⁵ emerging from the chaos of urban spaces, which even encourage *trickstering* and challenging all rules. Paradoxically, Pener, like *trickster*, again and again, may be seen not only as a personification of chaos, but also as a figure trying to synchronize existence.¹⁶ Both pener and *trickster* move in the space *between* order and chaos. It enables them to call into question

the received conception of reality and to play the role of creative co-participants of the reality, whose potential grows or even is in full swing under the conditions of an uncontrollable chaos.¹⁷ Penerstwo aptly recognizes the contemporary chaotic city as a reservoir of opportunities, which constitute an environment for action – as William J. Hynes puts it, relating to the *trickster's* condition – in a liminal zone, somewhere between the margins and the center, in an environment where one may act between extremities and where no border is finally closed¹⁸; in this liminal area there is 'a threshold' and after crossing it something creative begins.¹⁹

Therefore, both pener and *trickster* take delight in incessant transgressions as well as in the constant crossing the borders, back and forth (thus, in the sense that Georges Bataille understood the process). Despite the fact that, as Stach Szablowski notices, Penerstwo avoids 'instructing or enlightening

¹³ After Müller (2009: 17).

¹⁴ In Poznań's local dialect a word 'pener' has two meanings. It means either a bum, a down-and-out or a hooligan. It is a Polish version of German word 'der Penner', which is derived from the verb 'pennen' being a slang expression for 'to sleep'.

¹⁵ This notion is a paraphrase of Michał Lasota's comment on characters from Wojciech Bąkowski's movie, see: Wojciech Bąkowski. *Piękno* (Beauty) (2009).

¹⁶ This description, in relation to *trickster*, was proposed by John Briggs i F. David Peat, after: Hellwig (2009:27).

¹⁷ Hellwig (2009: 30, 26).

¹⁸ Hynes and Doty (1997: 34–35).

¹⁹ Hynes and Doty (1997: 40).

society²⁰, the way they *trickster* may have a strong impact on the beholder and the way his or her consciousness is transformed. It was already Carl Gustav Jung who suggested that *trickster* mysteriously contributes to everybody's psyche, which enables this figure to get through to the imagination with his message in a specific manner.²¹ Pernerstwo acts with similar force, since probably each of us has – even if it is well hidden – something of pener. It makes the beholder of Pernerstwo's art more susceptible to strength and expression of its message, which is marked by conspicuously insolent ostentation²² and provocative challenging of the rules. Delon Anne McNeely notices, in the spirit of psychoanalysis, that contemporary societies do not have a deep consciousness of myths and archetypes and, for this reason, they do not recognize the way that the *trickster* enriches or even improves the actual system of values.²³ As a figure representing a paradoxical category of 'a sacred amorality', *trickster*, and his peculiar *alter ego*, that is pener, is not *immoral*, but rather *amoral*.²⁴ He aims at touching such aspects of reality which allow to tell something important and de facto subtle, even if the means of expressions are rude, vulgar, blunt and deliberately 'contaminated' with coarse, pener dirt.

The actions and works of Pernerstwo fit into the understanding of the *trickster* figure proposed by Hynes, who claims that *trickster* is not an individually motivated deviant, but a socially legitimized figure with moralistic aspects.²⁵ Another paradox of the nature of *trickstering* Pener is that through acting on the edge of the established order, he makes us aware of the definition²⁶ underlying it. Breaking the rules, he simultaneously confirms their existence, either affirming them through negation or reconstructing them through deconstruction. It very often takes the shape of a game or even a play²⁷, which – as Roger Callois and Johann Huizinga *inter alia* suggested – creates an unusual situation, where common rules stop to be compulsory and interference and dissonance, the lack of prudery

and intentional 'impurity' of art becomes received poetics.²⁸

Pernerstwo's *trickstering*, in a seemingly nonchalant way, confines the 'regular' perception of reality, suggesting instead different, original approaches to it²⁹; thus, Pernerstwo makes an attempt to transform the consciousness of the beholder. According to Kathleen Ashley, whether such actions are effective and activate new approaches, depends on the interpretative abilities of a society, within which the *trickster* acts.³⁰ Pernerstwo's art not only mediates between parallel realities and 'worlds', but it also has shamanic intentions; according to its critics, it is particularly noticeable in the artistic works of Magda Starska and Wojciech Bąkowski.³¹ There is no doubt that the mediation between worlds and shamanism alike belong to the iron characteristics of *trickster*, which enable him to activate the creative potential of the field of games as well as of the liminal zone of *between*, where the 'threshold' of creativity is located.³² The way Pernerstwo is *trickstering* also contributes to the stimulation of a connection between consciousness and subconsciousness, between the head and the gut. 'If we were to transfer this division into the field of fine arts, *the art of head* would be an intellectual art (...). *The art of the gut* would be blunt, expressive and directed directly toward the beholder.'³³ A beholder, standing face to face with the works and actions of *trickstering* Peners feels his own guts, in order to be finally seduced by the pervasive, often ostentatiously rude and insolent ambiguity of a message. In the end, the beholder also has both something of a pener, and a *trickster*.

Trick-steering by The Krasnals

The activity of an anonymous group, The Krasnals, exemplifies something we may call 'a classical' attitude of *trickster*.³⁴ The name of the group refers to the *trickstering* actions of the Orange Alternative (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa) from Wrocław,

²⁰ Szablowski (2010: 137).

²¹ Jung (1954); After Müller (2009: 16).

²² Szablowski (2010: 137).

²³ McNeely (1996: 8, 13–14).

²⁴ Hyde (1998: 10).

²⁵ Hynes and Doty (1997: 7).

²⁶ Street (1972: 101).

²⁷ Kosińska (2007) and Kosińska (2008: 15).

²⁸ Michał Lasota's account of Pernerstwo art, see: Lasota (2008: 3).

²⁹ Lasota (2009).

³⁰ Ashley (1988: 113).

³¹ Compare: Suchora (2009) and Lasota (2009).

³² Hellwig (2009: 151–152) and Ricketts (1997: 87–105).

³³ Lasota (2008: 3).

³⁴ A comprehensive article, by Ewelina Jarosz, on The Krasnals' activity was published in catalog of their exhibition in Szyperska Gallery in Poznań: Jarosz (2010).

which took place mainly in 1980s. It is also a reference to characters from fairy-tales, often prankish and acting on the borderland of the fantastic and the real worlds³⁵. Members of The Krasnals – like their fairy-tale *alter ego* and every true *trickster* – act in the zone of *in between*. In their case it means moving between the sphere of the so called high (or official) art and the unofficial guerilla tactics performed outside of institutions. The Krasnals arrived at the conclusion that for them, the threshold at which creativity begins is located in the high tension emerging from the critical attitude toward the activity of artists, curators and critics who are recognized as the *establishment* setting the rules and hierarchies in the world of art. In this *in between zone*, The Krasnals eagerly took the role of a typical *trickster* who, according to Hynes, attempts to overthrow authorities and beliefs, disregards any prestige, and aspires to be an official and even ritual blasphemer with regard to received beliefs.³⁶ In Hynes' account, *the trickster* is always greedy for new food and breaks all taboos; the paradox of his condition is that even if he finds something to satisfy his hunger, he not always makes the most of it. Since the driving force behind his activity is not a feeling of fullness, which could put his vigilance as well as critical and impish sense into sleep, but a sense of constant unfulfillment and incessant quest.³⁷ The Krasnals, similarly to *the trickster* from Hellwig's account, strive for maintaining autonomy and total freedom, distancing themselves from any authority,³⁸ they want to remain in a niche outside all systems in order to disassemble them in a systematic and subversive way.

On their internet blog (www.the-krasnals.blogspot.com), members of the group declare that they continue a tradition of a critical art of the 1990s, which aimed at exposing the mechanisms of consumer society; they also emphasize their sensitivity to contemporary signs of the legacy of communism. The main target of their attack became a circle related to 'Krytyka Polityczna'³⁹. One of their recent actions was 'Make Love Not Art', which took place during The Venice Biennale in the midst of a vernissage in the Polish exhibition

hall. The Krasnals, employing a strategy of play and game, typical for *the trickster*, propagated love instead of art and deconstructed the atmosphere of solemnity surrounding the presentation of movies by Yael Bartana. Masked and holding a pink microphone they tried to interview celebrities of the Polish art scene asking them facetiously about their favorite dish or about the name of the stylist who dressed them for this special occasion. The Krasnals enthusiastically lauded the (so called) pink-tacky-candy revolution in art opposing, as they described it on their blog: 'the leftist bourgeoisie of contemporary art', 'nomenklatura tourism of artistic elites' or the relationships between political propaganda and contemporary art.

This kind of *trick-steering* rests on the conscious choice of such a tactic, which in spite of its 'peaceful' connotation, paradoxically, may serve as a tool to disassemble, mock and to completely transform an existing situation. The transformation of the situation is one of the main targets of every *trickster* who derives his power from interfering in a given context and transforming it in an unexpected and pronounced way.⁴⁰ As Hynes remarks, the *trickster* is the master of transformations; on the most basic level, it is visible in his affinity to disguise, which is also discernible in The Krasnals' attitude. Members of the group, hiding their faces and in a disguise suitable for the chosen tactic, enter 'into the middle' of a given situation – in this case into a vernissage in the Polish exhibition hall – striving for the transformation of pomposity into levity. They show up as 'enemies' of the group, which is behind the organization of the exhibition in the Polish pavilion, but – paradoxically and against stereotypical expectations – they do not show hostility, but declare love and willingness to interact. This is a typical strategy of *trickster*: to mislead, to confuse, to embarrass and to put in a situation, in which practically any response to the candy, tacky revolution may turn out compromising.

In the night following the vernissage, The Krasnals – acting yet again in the vein of *trickster* maliciousness and rascality – sneaked in through the door of the exhibition hall, padlocked it and put information on it that the only representation of Polish art during this year's Biennial in Venice is the banner made by them: *Pole lifting meteorite from Pope. 21.37*, which is placed on the main bridge in

³⁵ In Polish the word 'Krasnal' means a dwarf.

³⁶ Hynes and Doty (1997: 37).

³⁷ Hynes and Doty (1997: 42).

³⁸ Hellwig (2009: 37).

³⁹ A quarterly socio-political magazine published by new left circle.

⁴⁰ Hynes and Doty (1997: 37).

the vicinity of Arsenal. On their blog The Krasnals identified the meteorite, known from the work by Maurizio Catellan, with a symbolic confirmation of the rule of the present art establishment in Poland.

The Krasnals thus take on the role of *trickster*, who unceasingly provokes and scandalizes; an embodiment of rebel and of lack of discipline that resists socially legitimized rules.⁴¹ By means of exposure of ideological foundations of standpoints and phenomena, which are targets of his attacks, he attempts to break and to disassemble the received and the ossified. As every *trickster*, however, launching an assault on received norms and situations, he not only mocks them, calls them into question and transforms them, but he also explicitly makes us aware of their existence, indicates where they and the present power are located; it also motivates the second flank to defend its values.⁴² Under those circumstances, both factions barricade themselves in the opposing camps more and more often. On the one hand, it intensifies the *trick-steering* of The Krasnals, but on the other hand, it gives it a specific, clearly defined profile, oriented towards constant attacks at all contemporary signs of leftist legacy in Polish reality. Such an attitude may result in generalizations and oversimplifications in judgment of a situation. In consequence, the *trickster*-Krasnal may get too close to one of the radical camps; while the crucial parts of his charm are: misleading, avoiding final declarations and unambiguous classifications as well as acting in the zone of unpredictability and of *between*. The Krasnals, however, are becoming a little bit too predictable in their unpredictability and their enthusiasm is losing its initial freshness. Maybe they should, following the call of the ambiguous nature of *trickster*, start thinking about transforming themselves? In order not to become a living myth, which solely plays the role of a ritual safety valve or a vent for the frustrated, who found themselves outside of the protection of the establishment. Hynes, in his analysis of *trickster* myths writes about such an eventuality.⁴³ Who knows, maybe his intuition is also correct in relation to the *trickster*-Krasnal.

Pener and Krasnal in trickster's mirror

I refer in this article to the *trickster* figure in order to problematize the attitudes of both Poznań groups, Penerstwo and The Krasnals, and to reveal their peculiarity in relation to the field of meanings, which that very concept opens. Although Pener and Krasnal would probably never meet in reality, they meet unexpectedly in this text and survey each other in the mirror, which is given to them by an unpredictable *trickster* (I wish I could say it is the author of the text who is the *trickster*!)

Despite the fact that the *trickster* in myths is represented, above all, as a loner, it turns out that this figure may also correlate with actions of artistic groups considered to be more or less cohesive communities acting in accordance with attitudes announced in manifestos. Nevertheless, at this stage, one may not overlook an essential difference in their approach to the question of collectivity. While Penerstwo, a so called 'loose collective', emphasizes the individuality of every member, The Krasnals put in the first place the anonymity of artists, who operate en block and who, in accordance with the guidelines for their actions, do not reveal their names nor their faces, nor the authorship of pictures, blog entries and scripts for the actions. Whereas in the case of Penerstwo, the individualism and autonomy of the works of particular members of the 'loose collective' are stressed, The Krasnals above all emphasize the collective character of actions and the community spirit of their fight. Therefore, one may draw the conclusion that The Krasnals are *trick-steering* in a definitely more directed way than Penerstwo, which manifests its 'disarray in the sphere of customs', weaknesses, disorganization and intuition. While The Krasnals seem to wield the steer stronger and to *trick-steer* in a specific direction, Penerstwo glorifies the fragility and looseness of intra-group relations.

Both groups, undoubtedly, are *trickstering* on the Polish art scene, yet each of them – in spite of the obvious relationships with the theoretical framework of the *trickster* figure – does it in its own way. The common ground for both groups is the use of play, game, mockery and irony as well as the employment of often blunt, and commonly regarded as vulgar means of expression. All this is done in order to notoriously, even incessantly, call the established hierarchies into question. Trickster, Pener and Krasnal prove that things perceived as

⁴¹ Makarius (1997: 82).

⁴² Hynes and Doty (1997: 2, 208).

⁴³ Hynes and Doty (1997: 206).

funny, vulgar and blunt may turn out to be crucial for understanding culture. The *trickster's* and beholder's laughter from *trickster's* impish behaviors may make us aware of the existence those layers of existence, which usually are ignored.⁴⁴ As Mieke Bal aptly notes, another trump of *trickstering* is the fact that it has the power of generating a discourse on the metasemiotic and metasocial level⁴⁵, which in turn sets in motion the mechanism of exploration and more profound reflection on the condition of contemporary culture. By means of *trick-steering*, Pener and Krasnal not only deconstruct borders and taboos, but also reconstruct them by exposing them and forcing people to discuss their status. By reversing the image of the world, *the trickster* in fact acts as a kind of *camera obscura*.⁴⁶ The image created by this reversion may turn out to be more true than the one, which results from a serious approach to reality. The transfer of *trickster* figure from oral African tradition to the early African Diaspora in North America was, among others, related to resistance against slavery. As time went on, the figure became a mental tool used to overcome all possible kinds of slavery and constraints in order to change one's own life.⁴⁷ Therefore, from the very beginning, a spirit of resistance had been characteristic of *trickster*; both Penerstwo and The Krasnals also act in this spirit, in their own ways.

As a common characteristic of the two groups one may indicate a negative attitude towards politics and political commentary in art.⁴⁸ Paradoxically enough, The Krasnals' fight against politically engaged art makes their art politically involved too. However, maybe we can consider it another manifestation of an impish charm of the *trickster*?

The crucial difference between the two groups lays in their approach to artistic technique and to the process of creating a language of artistic expression. While Penerstwo, employing categories we may even call old-fashioned, refer without the slightest embarrassment to such ideas as individuality, style and artistry, or even to the nineteenth-century approach to the process of creation.⁴⁹ The Krasnals claim to be artists who deliberately and

ostentatiously recycle works of other artists, critics and curators. Nevertheless, both strategies, paradoxically – though they are radically different, for one is closer to modernism and the other to postmodernism – may be constitutive parts for attitudes we generally can call *trickstering*, which in this case means remaining outside the mainstream. It is also worth noting that one of the artistic techniques used by The Krasnals is a traditional easel painting, which – contrary to stereotypical beliefs – in their case has a *trick-steering* potential similar to an action or blog entries.

One of the crucial differences is connected to the realm of activity of Krasnal and Pener. Penerstwo's members emphasize their close connection with Poznań, which is reflected in the name of the group taken from Poznań's local dialect. The Krasnals on the other hand, identify, above all, with virtual space. More and more often however, they choose to act in the 'real world'.⁵⁰ *Trickstering* actions on the Web are also carried out by a Serbian group Zampa di Leone, which puts on its blog comic strips as well as ridiculing commentaries on established hierarchies of the Balkan art scene (e.g. launching an attack on the IRWIN group).⁵¹ We may then regard the Internet as a non-place, which is ideally suited to *trickstering*; both The Krasnals and Zampa di Leone skillfully make use of it.

Trickster, described by Hynes, following Nicolaus of Cusa, as a coincidence of opposites⁵², through the figures of Pener and Krasnal, reveals its whole potential of rakishness and ambiguity. Writing about these two groups as well as about their attitudes may also be called *trickstering*. The question is, however, whether one can outgrow *trickstering*? Who will Pener and Krasnal be in five, ten or fifteen years? Does *trickstering* carry a danger of an entanglement in its own strategies? Does success fit *trickster's* image? The last question arises in the context of the listing of the names of the members of Penerstwo at the top of different rankings (for instance in 'Playboy'⁵³), which inevitably contributes to establishing a new order and new hierarchy on

⁴⁴ Hynes and Doty (1997: 31).

⁴⁵ compare: Bal (1988: 137, 148), quoted in: Hynes and Doty (1997: 21–27).

⁴⁶ Hynes and Doty (1997: 208).

⁴⁷ M'Baye (2009: 207).

⁴⁸ See: Lasota (2009: 80).

⁴⁹ Lasota (2009: 87).

⁵⁰ For instance, *Ściana Placzu / Śmiechu* (*The Wall of Cry / of Laughter*) in Poznań, *Make Love Not Art* in Venice. The Krasnals also published their own newspaper, which was distributed during Venetian action: *ART POLICE GAZETTE*.

⁵¹ See: <http://www.various-euro.com/zampa/>, viewed on 21.07.2011.

⁵² Hynes and Doty (1997: 34).

⁵³ 'Playboy' (Polish edition), April 2011.

the art scene. Does Poznań then need a new *trickster*, who would attack Penerstwo? Or maybe The Krasnals will do it soon? Insofar as they will not get bored with trick-**steering** in current shape and they will not undergo a surprising metamorphosis, as a true *trickster* is used to do.

Translated by Izabela Kolbon

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Lady or trickster with an ermine. Review of actions around the most famous picture in Polish collections

In May 2011, during the 8th Gala of the Małopolska Journalists, *Lady with an Ermine* was given the title of Media Personality. The jury justified its decision: "Thanks to The Media Personality the eyes of Poland, Europe and the whole world should be turned on the Małopolska. *Lady with an Ermine*, that used to be seen with the weasel as well, perfectly fulfils this condition. She is not afraid of travelling, her peregrinations were commented by British, Belgian, German and Polish media and even ministers. Conservators and owners argued for her. His Majesty The King of Spain kindly requested her to visit Madrid. And – think only – she was born in 1490!"

Zofia Gołubiew, the director of The National Museum in Cracow, commented then: "We have to do everything she remains the Lady, not a celebrity"¹.

Seventeen years ago Marek Rostworowski wrote, in the introduction to the book *Gry o damę* (Games about the Lady):

"Around a work of art some kind of magnetic field is set sometimes – the picture, one amongst thousands of others, is becoming the goal destination of the wandering, desire, crowded gathering, inquiry and dispute – for the people because

of their curiosity, sincere enchantment, ambition to follow a famous beauty and to show up to the world accompanied by her, inspired by passion for collecting or – by the instinct of a plunderer... Portrait of this girl, looking towards nobody knows what and without knowing why, keeping a white animal/creature, had become repeatedly an object of games – military, political and prestige games. At least thirty times this portrait has changed the place of residence, it was transported on horse, by carriage, by cart, by train, by car, by plane, by ferry – sometimes even carried under one's arm [...] The background for all these circumstances was the fate of the country, which constantly changed its shape on Europe's map"².

The subject-matter of this essay is neither the presentation of allegoric nature of the famous portrait nor the question of authorship of Leonardo da Vinci.

The author's intention is to describe and analyze actions around *the Portrait of Lady with an Ermine*, which have electrified Polish and foreign public for the last few months and try to find out whether the picture may become a trickster.

This picture has been a property of the Princes' Czartoryski collection for over 200 years. During

¹ PAP's news on 15.05.2011, viewed on 29 September 2011.

² Rostworowski (1994: 5).

this period of time it was becoming more and more important and famous. Nowadays one can hardly imagine the lack of this very picture in Polish collections.

Adam Jerzy Czartoryski obtained the painting in Italy. In 1801 he brought the *oeuvre* to Puławy and gave it to his mother Isabel [Polish: Izabela].

From 1809 to 1830 the picture was preserved in The Gothic House. At that time Puławy was the expansive centre of patriotic ideas and, undoubtedly, the painting must have been seen by hundreds of people. There are almost 2000 signatures in the visitors' book from 1827 to 1830.

The painting's luck is connected with the Czartoryski's patriotic mission. After the fall of the November uprising (1830), the picture was transported firstly to Sieniawa, secondly – *via* Dresden – to Hôtel Lambert in Paris, to the private rooms of Prince Adam Jerzy.

In 1882 the painting was brought to the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow, altogether with the picture of Raphael. The collection of masterpieces influenced the government's approval for creation the Sieniawa Trust. The fortune of the Sieniawa Trust were the estates, belongings and capital worth around 4,5 million Austrian crowns i.e. 2 million Rhine Gold ducats³.

The threat of war in 1914 caused the temporary placement of the picture in Dresden. At that time many German and Italian art historians were able to acknowledge with the painting, inclining to Leonardo's attribution.

In 1918 Mr. Bauman from the German Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated the value of the three masterpieces (Leonardo's, Raphael's and Rembrandt's) to about 3 million German marks. He also recommended retaining the pictures and Czartoryski's fortune in Germany. After long efforts, in 1920 the objects were brought back to independent Poland.

The Second World War caused further threats to the painting. Just before the Germans' attack in 1939, the collection was hidden in Sieniawa. After the invasion the shelter was looted. The paintings and other objects were scattered all over the floor.

"The Leonardo's painting was damaged by shoe and put away on the shelf [...].

As Mrs. Małkowska was coming out, she took the portrait secretly with her, sewed into silk fabric and hid it."⁴

A few days later the picture was taken to Pelkinie by August Czartoryski. From there, Gestapo commandeered 16 chests to Rzeszów. From Cracow came dr. Kajetan Mühlmann, the special representative for Registration and Safekeeping of Treasures of Art and Culture who took the chest with Leonardo, Rafael and Rembrandt away to an unknown place.

After that the painting turned up in Hans Frank's hands. Together with Rembrandt it was found in Hans Frank's willa in Schliersee near Neuhaus. Finally, in November 1945 the masterpieces were taken away from American's possession by Karol Estreicher.

After World War II, The Czartoryski Museum entered a difficult era. In 1947, on the basis of the court's judgment, the museum was subscribed to the inheritance after Augustyn Czartoryski. Neither the components of the legacy nor the heir were specified. The museum was supposed to be a private institution, but – due to the communist regime – it was incorporated in 1950 to The National Museum in Cracow as the Czartoryski Collection.

The peaceful atmosphere around the picture was only apparent. On the pretext of the commemoration of 500th Leonardo's birthday anniversary, the communist government decided to take both Leonardo and Rembrandt to Warsaw.

The authorities were planning to set up in Warsaw the great museum – Polish *Louvre*. For this purpose the regime planned to gather the best objects from all over the country. The pictures from The Czartoryski Collection were supposed to be the pearls of this project and to serve as a propaganda tool. However, one can hardly imagine Cracow's collections without Leonardo or Rembrandt, as the origin of the pictures was not forgotten. The respect for the Czartoryski family was deeply rooted in the mentality of still living witnesses of the Family glory. Both Cracow and Warsaw were fighting for the rights to exhibit the masterpieces. After three years of the Lady's imprisonment in Warsaw, the picture finally was returned to its home in Cracow.

The picture remained in the same place for almost thirty years. In 1972 due to the political situ-

³ Rostworowski (1994: 61), author refers to *The History of the Czartoryski's Trust* by Janusz Nowak (typescript).

⁴ Rostworowski (1994: 82).

ation and the so-called friendship with the Soviet Union, the authorities agreed to loan the painting to Moscow for the exhibition *European portrait from XV to XX century*. Lending this picture behind the iron curtain was very risky from the legal point of view. Legal claims might have occurred – the Czartoryski family could demand its return⁵.

After the 1989 breakthrough, Princes' Czartoryski Foundation was founded in 1991 as a department of the National Museum in Cracow. On the basis of a notary deed, the Foundation was the owner of the collection and the museum buildings. The Republic of Poland represented by the National Museum in Cracow was bound to sustain the museum and library. The Foundation was supervised by the Minister of Art and Culture.

The picture of the Lady experienced a meaningful evolution from being a communist system hostage to the sign of the new Polish opening to the world.

The Lady's journeys

The first long journey the Lady took was to the United States in 1991. Specialized examinations which were taken there, showed that the original blackness was enlightened from the right side by the shades of blue and gray. In 1991–1992 it was one of the highlights of *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*, in Washington in the 500 anniversary of America's discovery by Christopher Columbus. In 1993–94 it visited Sweden, in 1998–99 Italy. In 2001–02 it was a part of the exhibition of Czartoryski Foundation in Japan, and one year later *Leonardo da Vinci and Splendor of Poland* in the USA. From October 2009 till February 2010 it was in The Fine Arts Museum in Budapest on the exhibition *From Botticelli to Titian*. Recently, in 2011 in Poland the picture was presented in The Royal Castle in Warsaw, in Royal Palace in Madrid, in Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and – finally – in the National Gallery in London. After the world tour it safely came back to Cracow⁶.

Since 10th January 2010, the Galleries in the Czartoryski Palace have been closed due to restoration. The Lady was supposed to be exhibited in

The Erasm Ciołek's Palace after coming back from Warsaw. But it was not.

One could hear a lot about The Foundation at the beginning of December 2010. It was then, when the idea of lending the picture to the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the court of Milan* in National Gallery in London in 2011 was revealed to the public⁷. Some critical statement occurred in media: "Lady with an Ermine is put at risk by loan from Poland to London"⁸, too many journeys may have negative effect on the painting, what if the plane crashes? It was raised, that the Louvre statute forbids lending Mona Lisa. The plans of lending the Lady were also criticized by the National Museum's management, media, conservators. Authorities like prof. Maria Poprzęcka⁹, prof. Zdzisław Żygulski jr¹⁰ argued. Generally, the public opinion realized then even a hypothetical possibility of losing the picture due to the catastrophe would be an irreparable loss for our national heritage.

Where was a trickster in all this? What was its role?

It was fed with a conflict, antagonism, it explored human emotions and the local battles. On the one hand, there were accusations of attempts to make money on the picture. On the other hand, the voices of the local patriots who wanted to retain the picture in Cracow at all costs.

Everyone assured their goodwill and the best intentions¹¹.

Is it the everlasting conflict of the old and the young? No, it is not. Among the antagonists of lending the Lady were the Young Democrats Association¹². It was the culmination of struggle for the Lady. Minister of Culture agreed to lend the painting to Berlin, Madrid and London even though the conservators opinions were against. Eventually, the picture left.

The exhibitions were blockbusters in all capitals. The openings were broadcast all over the world. Everyone was able to become the possessor of Cecilia's image on magnets, notebooks, calendars, pencils etc. Press releases showed the Lady as a celebrity and, what's typical for tabloids, beauty

⁵ Rostworowski (1994:127).

⁶ It came back (secretly) on 8th Feb. 2012 – it was known to the public in News TVP1 at 19.30 on 12 February 2012.

⁷ Grzyb (2010).

⁸ Alberge (2010).

⁹ Poprzęcka (2010).

¹⁰ Żygulski (2010).

¹¹ Zamoyski (2010).

¹² Rapalski (2011).

contest between Mona Lisa and Cecilia Gallerani¹³ was announced.

The lady came back safely to Poland on 8th February 2012. It is to stay here for at least 10 years – according to the promise made by Minister of Culture, Bogdan Zdrojewski¹⁴.

Events around the picture

One of the actions was the installation made by Zeus entitled *Original copy – LDV Lady with an Ermine and the bag* during The ArtBoom Festival in 2009. The curator of the project was Marta Raczek¹⁵. Zeus is a nickname of French street artist working since early 90's. His nick derives from the name of regional train Zeus under which he barely died. The artist was one of the main animators of French street art. At first, he created tags, stickers and graffiti. In the late 90's he started his experiments with more complicated forms of visual communication, which led him to creating the formula of invisible graffiti, shadows, visual attacks, kidnapping, visual violence, liquidated logos and original copies.

The majority of Zeus actions, deriving from classical and illegal municipal interventions turns into a visual attack on surrounding reality. He acts like Phantom and Spirit (comic heroes). Working in a municipal space he possesses it only for himself and his projects.

The film from the happening in Cracow shows Zeus just before entering the museum, dressing up his typical yellow costume (ill. 1). He is coming into The Czartoryski's Palace, walking through the rooms. He stops for a moment in front of the image of Cecilia Gallerani and a yellow-gold handbag (ill. 2). After that, he is coming out the building.

Project curator, Marta Raczek, wrote about Zeus's activity in Cracow: "Louis Vuitton is one of the most-valued brands in the world. At the same time it is most frequently imitated and in consequence the most protected one. With his intervention Zeus made an attack on a strong brand. This attack was presented as a deceitful installation in the form of a yellow handbag, in the type designed by Louis Vuitton, on which the famous LV mono-

gram will be embossed, being linked with its hidden renaissance predecessor – a signature abbreviation used by the master of Italian renaissance. In his project, the artist based on the fact that the LV logo, is suspiciously reminiscent of the LDV monogram used by Leonardo da Vinci. Placing the handbag in the vicinity of the famous portrait painted by Leonardo led to a shocking link of two cultural orders: symbolic and commercial. At the same time the intriguing link discloses the commercial status of both "objects". Vuitton handbags are treated as the most important object of desire by many fashion buffs, similarly the Lady with an Ermine is an object of desire, particularly visual. Both these "cultural products" have become victims of numerous forgeries, which, what is more shocking, strengthens their uniqueness. The visually challenging installation was created to turn the many century approach to art, fashion, the copy and the original, as well as the relationship between what is old and new upside down".

On 30th April 2011, at Czerwiński Boulevard in Cracow Ewa Ciepielewska happening took place, entitled *At the bottom of Wawel*. It initiated the artistic event *The cruise of Lady with an Ermine on Vistula river* from Cracow to Gdansk and back¹⁶. Ciepielewska planned to take the image of the Lady painted by her on canvas 30 x 40 cm (ill. 3). The lady was transported together with other goods like salt, coal, cereal and modern art collection Volans. The final of the cruise took place on the museum ship Soldek, where the Lady was exhibited. Lady with an Ermine was intended to be the main attraction. Originally it was made in 1989 for Luxus magazine edited by legendary group Luxus. The painting was also exhibited in *The 80's generation* in November 2010 in The National Museum in Cracow.

Ewa Ciepielewska, described this journey (ill. 4–5) in a diary. She depicted the time they spent together singing the 16th century songs, reading Chinese poetry, drinking tea. They spent time inspired by Renaissance artists, searching for the harmony of art and nature in contemporary world. Musicians even named their band "White Weasels" (ill. 6) in glory of the Leonardo's picture. The Lady acted as pop cultural idol.

How to interpret this action? At that time the debate on lady's journeys was on. Ewa Ciepielews-

¹³ Leith (2011).

¹⁴ TVP 1 Channel Main News Edition on 10 February 2012.

¹⁵ Raczek (2009).

¹⁶ Ciepielewska (2011).



III 1. *Zeus* at Artboomfestival 2009, project curator: Marta Raczek, photo: Weronika Szmuc; Cracow Festival Office Archive



III 2. *Zeus* - Original copy - LDV: *Lady with an Ermine and a Handbag*, Artboomfestival 2009, Project curator: Marta Raczek, photo: Weronika Szmuc; Cracow Festival Office Archive



III 3.
Ewa Ciepielewska, *Lady with an Ermine*, template, 1989, 30 x 40 cm, multiplicity; photo: Ewa Ciepielewska

ka's action may have double meaning: first, as "the desire for presentification" – thus the choice of Leonardo and throwback to the past to the eighties – secondly, as an inspiration to pop-culture.

The Lady took part in magical rituals – singing, reading poetry, with a distance from reality, in search of inspiring quality. The Lady was there as a reality whisperer. The phenomena of lady – trickster is the ability to be in two places at the same

time. The true Lady was in fact closed in a safe in Warsaw, while at the same time as trickster she was travelling to Gdansk.

Conclusion

In the light of the above mentioned events the following problem arise: can a worldwide famous picture become a trickster? It is widely observed that the emotions the Lady creates are not only con-



III 4.

On the boat on the Vistula river, around Toruń, June 2011; photo: Ewa Ciepielewska



III 5.

The end of the Lady's trip to Gdańsk. Exhibition at SS Sołdek on 23rd May 2011; photo: Ewa Ciepielewska



III 6.

White Weasels open air concert in Puławy, The Czartoryski's Park, May 2011' photo: Ewa Ciepielewska

nected with the way we perceive her as the masterpiece. Despite the mentioned at the beginning fear of being a celebrity, as a matter of fact, Lady has become significant in media. Actually, she became a celebrity a couple years ago. And now, unexpectedly, she plays the role of a trickster, bringing out the good and evil. The Lady fascinates us and at the same time makes us feel anxious. Her fate – departures and arrivals attracts media, moves the Internet commentators. The former Cracow – Warsaw conflict has revived.

Some more questions arise: is the State obliged to buy the deposits of pieces of art?¹⁷ Are third parties empowered to give advice to 'The Princes' Czartoryski Foundation on how to manage the collection?

Lady with an Ermine cannot exist without the publicity. This is yet another argument to give her the name of *trickster*¹⁸, especially in Poland, the post-communist country, impoverished by wars and still soaked in soviet mentality. An important work of fine art can act as a catalyst to set off new trains of thought. By discussing it we show what kind of recipients we are, having in mind that each age redefines the trickster it needs.

According to the Scandinavian mythology¹⁹, Loki, who plays the role of trickster, is supposed to bring a *ragnarok* (destruction of gods) in the mortal battle. It is the role of trickster – to create and to destroy and to accelerate the gods' twilight. From this point of view, after destruction, there must be formation.

As a final result of the battle about the Lady, on 14 July 2011 it was reported that, "in order to improve the functioning of The Princes' Czartoryski Foundation and to assure the correct collaboration with the National Museum in Cracow," Prince Adam Karol Czartoryski Bourbon, heir to the collections of the world-renowned Czartoryski Museum, has approved the dismissal of the enterprise's entire management board, including its chairman, Count Adam Zamoyski"²⁰. The new board is working on.

We will not get away from a matter of ownership of cultural property. The Lady with an Ermine is at a possession of The Princes' Czartoryski



Ill 7. Portrait of Piotr Uszok with a cobble, artist unknown

słaba jakość !!!

Foundation. But the question whether to loan this picture or not, is a subject of entire nation. Insurance of the picture to the amount of 300 m € seems to be a huge sum. But a loss of this picture would cause a world disaster to our cultural heritage. Can we assume, in world crisis, that our country would ever be able to benefit the former proprietors' for their devotion in creating that special museum and for saving remains of the past? The gods' twilight is of great dimension. Let's be awake. Trickster wears many masks.

Post scriptum

There is yet another activity around this picture. In April 2011 on the Main Market in Katowice a portrait of Piotr Uszok²¹ (president of Katowice) was hanged. The president's face replaced the image of the Lady (ill. 7). Instead of an ermine he had a cobble in his hand. As we can see, trickster is not scared even of local politics.

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¹⁷ Kowalski (2005).

¹⁸ Lock (2002).

¹⁹ Cotterell (1993: 245).

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Role of Trickster in Post/-Communist and Post-Colonial Countries

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Subversive strategies in contemporary Russian art

There are several trends of subversive potential in the Russian art scene. The reference point for artists is the awareness resulting from the transformation of the political system: the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the opening up of Russia to the Western world.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in addition to an all-encompassing sense of freedom, an experience of widespread disorder and confusion appeared. Analysing the painful transformation process in Russia after the collapse of the communist system, Russian historian Yuri Afanasyev draws attention to the fact that since the late eighties different levels of social life have been going underground, beyond the control of the repressing power. Analysing the process, we must take into account several aspects related to it. On the one hand, the persistent resistance of society can be seen as a destabilizing factor in the totalitarian system. On the other hand, gargantuan public appetite, caused by too strong and long-term top-down control, has resulted in negative consequences. A double life associated with circumventing, or even crossing the law, leads to the formation of illegal economy, based on informal crime structures¹. The historian concludes that the unofficial privatization of state

property in which the Soviet nomenclature also participated, striving to secure its position in the new system, began long before the fall of the Soviet Union.

The dismantling of the old mechanisms of power and the construction of a new social and political order evoke a sense of chaos, instability, and loss of control over the irregular reality. This gives rise to contemporary art which uses the same range of possibilities that are offered by everyday language i.e. all that is common, banal. This is done, however, in a perverse way. Art uses subversive strategies. Appropriating cultural space, artists break through the semantic sphere by means of de-contextualization and re-contextualization of signs, cultural texts². These strategies are used to analyse socio-political processes, related to the transformation of the system, in order to emphasize the disturbing aspect thereof, unconscious and thus even more dangerous.

One of the strategies undertaken by Russian artists involves referring to the official symbols of the communist state for its demythologization. This art originates from the circle of the so-called "soc art", related to Western "pop art". The term is a compilation of two words "socialism" and "art".

¹ Afanasyev (2005: 190).

² Ronduda (2006: 9–10).

It was invented in 1972 by two cooperating artists Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar³. The artists draw from the canons of socialist realist art. However, by introducing elements not belonging to the socialist realist discourse into the image space, they trigger subversive potential, and generate the effect of absurdity and parody.

Boris Groys, philosopher and theorist of contemporary art, analyses Russian conceptual art, developing in the Soviet Union in opposition to the official cultural policy. The researcher draws attention to the impact that poststructuralist and structuralist theories problematizing relationships between the sign and the reality had on soc art between the sixties and the eighties. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization was the most influential one. He perceived the carnival laughter as a deposing power, capable of bursting any hierarchical cultural system. Subjecting the system of signs in propaganda art to critical analysis, artists exposed its ideological basis and deconstructed the illusion of the "natural" representation of reality⁴.

Alexander Kosolapov repeatedly returns to a critical analysis of the official art language represented by socialist realism for a long period in the USSR. The Russian artist, residing in the United States since 1973, takes the issue of dialogue between the East and the West, Russia and America. Alexander Kosolapov's works are an attempt of critical insight into the processes which started in Russia in the so-called perestroika and reached its apogee after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the time when the old mechanisms of power were not yet overcome, Communist idols were replaced by new ones, adored with equally great zeal. Kosolapov strongly emphasizes this in his work *Two flags* (*Perestroika*, ill. 1) made in acrylic technique in 1989. It is composed of two overlapping planes: the first one – a copy of the American flag – is covered with a plane with a repeated pattern of the U.S. state flag. A rough-edged fragment of the Soviet flag with the hammer and sickle shines through the white stars in the upper left corner. In addition, Mickey Mouse sits in the lower right corner of the background on a travestied Soviet emblem with the words "Lenin", observing the mixture of signs from different systems. The violent intoxication with capitalism has led to a situation where the thirsty

consumer society absorbs Western novelties without thinking.

The sculpture *Mickey and Minnie. Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (2004, ill. 2) also combines the styles of totalitarian culture and consumer culture. In his work, Kosolapov draws from the icons of the communist and capitalist systems – the sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* by the Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina, and one of the most recognizable symbols of American culture – Mickey Mouse. Mukhina's sculpture was created on the occasion of the USSR's participation in the 1937 World's Fair in Paris⁵. *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* is a sculptural group of two figures representing a man and a woman, set in the immediate proximity to each other. The composition is built by two diagonal lines which run from the feet – right male and left female – strongly withdrawn to the rear and slightly spaced to the sides, through their torsos, and up to their raised hands, holding the hammer and sickle – the attributes of the working and peasant classes. The hands raised together determine the peak point of the composition in which all lines converge – diagonal lines, and the main vertical axis, marked at the bottom by the male and female legs bent at the knees, and supporting the weight of the figures. Due to its diagonal structure which gave the impression of moving upward and forward, and the thematic content, the sculpture fulfilled the propaganda programme of Soviet art, "involved in the construction of the new political system." The sculptural group set on a high pedestal gave monumental character to the whole complex and demonstrated the political aspirations of the Soviet Union⁶. Hubert Bilewicz highlights the political context related to the presentation of the Soviet pavilion at the World's Fair which was located opposite the pavilion of

³ Romanowa, Kopyrina (2004: 81–82).

⁴ Гройс (1993: 294–295).

⁵ The sculpture was transported in parts after the Paris Fair to Moscow. After reconstruction, it was exhibited in 1939 at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (now – the All-Russia Exhibition Centre). It underwent conservation in 1979 and later in 2003. After the works were completed in 2009, it returned to that place. The monumental form of the pavilion – the pedestal on which the statue was exposed at the Paris World's Fair was restored, yet its back part was reduced. The space now houses an exhibition hall and the Museum of Vera Mukhina. The sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, one of the most recognizable symbols of Soviet culture, has been used, among others, as a hallmark of the greatest Soviet (now Russian) film studio "Mosfilm". Since the forties of the twentieth century, Soviet films have been preceded by the presentation of the sculpture against the Spaska Tower of the Moscow Kremlin.

⁶ Голомшток (1994: 130).



Ill. 1. Alexander Kosolapov, *Two flags (Perestroika)*, 1989, acrylic on canvas

the Third Reich. Both pavilions, outstanding due to their monumental scale, were placed on either side of the Eiffel Tower⁷. The decision of the fair's organizers to put the two projects in close proximity was probably dictated by a desire to oppose the polarized totalitarian powers. However, the rivalry for leadership in the world moved to the level of an artistic project, and expressed through the monumental, classicist forms of both compositions forming a sort of uniform complex, revealed common characteristics of both systems⁸.

By making a travesty of the Soviet sculpture which implements socialist postulates, and introduces the elements of Western pop culture, Kosolapov smashes the seriousness and pretentiousness of the project. The figures of the worker and kolkhoz woman, repeated after the compositional structure of Mukhina's sculpture, have Mickey's and Minnie's heads. In his work, the artist reflects the spirit of the transformation period which can be considered in terms of the carnival⁹. Categories that order the world are reversed in the carnival atmosphere. In the Russian reality, old idols are replaced by new – Western ones. The artist forces us to make parallels between the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century and the capitalist system. Boris Groys sees a similarity in the process of popular culture sacralisation, both in the communist and capitalist systems. Sacrum is inextricably linked to ritual, i.e. practices based on repetitions, cyclicality. Mechanisms of reproduction, copying, offered



Ill. 2. Alexander Kosolapov, *Mickey and Minnie. Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, 2004, bronze

by mass media, move the sacred space to previously profane areas. The author writes about the sacred nature of all industrial culture where reproduction is the guiding principle, as well as the process of the working class sacralisation under the communist system¹⁰. This principle applied also to the area of propaganda, covering the whole range of Soviet society. Being carriers of ideology through their universality, reproduced communist symbols became a "natural" part of the social space¹¹.

The figure of the worker, the main theme in the art of socialist realism, was transformed by appropriate representational schemes, consisting of idealization and heroization of the character. Heavily muscled, having superhuman qualities, he was almost like a demigod, creating "a new world"¹². In his *Literature and Revolution* (1923), Leon Trotsky writes about the project of "a new man", "Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, and his voice more musical.

⁷ Hubert Bilewicz's lecture "Art and Freedom" from the series „ZDAcRZENIA SZTUKI” (11.12. 2012; Gdańsk, City Culture Institute).

⁸ Голомшток (1994: 131)

⁹ Bakhtin (1975: 57–126).

¹⁰ Гройс (2012).

¹¹ Гройс (2003: 306).

¹² Włodarczyk (1986: 19).

The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”¹³

Mickey Mouse, the character of Walt Disney’s animated films is a symbol of Western mass culture. Cartoon characters are in a sense immortal. Chopped, taken to pieces, they still come back to life. Their actions are fuelled by basic desires which they satisfy in an immoderate manner¹⁴. Desire is closely correlated with consumption. By encouraging us to buy what the market offers, advertising images excite in us the desire to have, and thus be better, worthy of admiration. However, the promise of pleasure and even happiness is never fulfilled. This does not undermine the faith in a beautiful mirage on the horizon¹⁵. Mass culture offers an alternative world, a sort of illusion which allows us to escape reality.

The combination of the communist and capitalist symbols indicates totalizing, unifying nature of the vision conveyed by popular culture. Although advertising messages seem to be fragmentary, they form a coherent language, ruled by separate laws. Just as in Disney’s cartoons where the world is never shown broken, capitalism is able to absorb even such different ideological messages as the symbols of the communist system, subjecting them to processes of commodification.

In one of his latest works, *Tatlin – Death of the Avant-garde* (2011, *ill. 3*), the artist returns to the Russian avant-garde project, the idea of Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*. A skeleton kneels in front of a spiral tower, embracing it with his outstretched hands, slightly bent at the elbows, giving the impression of keeping the structure from falling. The angle of the figure’s inclination has its counterpart in the tower – the main line which gives momentum to the structure is repeated through the line of the skeleton’s spine. This treatment does not strengthen the effect of dynamics which is characteristic of avant-garde art, but on the contrary – it impedes that. The kneeling figure does not have the potential for expansiveness, but it is running out of energy used to keep the structure from falling. The angular, sharp skeleton forms also correspond with

the construction lines of the tower. *Pagan (Tatlin’s Mushroom)* (2010) by the duo of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich is another work that makes a travesty of Tatlin’s monument which here grows on top of a mushroom cap. The fly-agaric mushroom, associated with what is irrational due to its natural hallucinogenic properties, is a much more stable base for the tower than it may seem at first glance. The work addresses the relationships of collective unconscious and power, as well as avant-garde, caught up in the propaganda of the new social order.

The category of yurodstvo, combining medieval Orthodox Church culture with folk carnival culture, is interesting in the view of strategies undertaken in contemporary art. The yurodivy were considered fools, crazy persons in contact with the spiritual world. The term *ypodьb* of Old Russian origin, means as much as stillborn fetus, and has other related meanings, such as unnatural, unknown, unusual, strange¹⁶. The saint has set a goal to reproach the world. His outrageous behaviour, often close to obscenity, hits the sensitive points of observers. Provoking the crowd to violent reactions, the yurodivy forces participants to show their true faces, so eagerly concealed under masks in everyday life.¹⁷

Rebellious behaviour of contemporary artists maintains the long tradition of “holy fools”. It can be said that the place of the yurodivy whose status was negated during the Enlightenment, has now been taken by artists who introduce a dissonance to the social order with their inadequate behaviour, thus revealing the mechanisms of its functioning.

This applies especially to art which enters public relations, and locates itself in urban areas. Public space in the communist system was closed for a private intervention which distorted the dominant ideological message. A reaction to the strict control of cultural life in the Soviet Union was unofficial art which, in opposition to socialist realism prevailing in the official circulation, stood in defence of traditional modernist values. The return to the autonomy of art, leading to the encapsulation of the language of art, was caused by a desire to escape from the ideologised humdrum reality. This attitude, however, weakened the critical potential of art¹⁸.

¹³ Trotsky (1925: 207).

¹⁴ Film *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (19:20–19:50), 2006; directed and produced by Sophie Fiennes, scripted and presented by Slavoj Žižek.

¹⁵ Berger (1997: 129–154).

¹⁶ Wodziński (2009: 43).

¹⁷ Wodziński (2009: 203).

¹⁸ Чухров (2008: 287).



Ill. 3. Alexander Kosolapov, *Tatlin - Death of the Avant-garde*, 2011, bronze

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, public space becomes a plane which gives alternative possibilities of participation through individual and collective articulation of identity¹⁹. The reality devoid of the ideological structure reveals its polyphonic nature which mixes different, sometimes mutually exclusive voices.

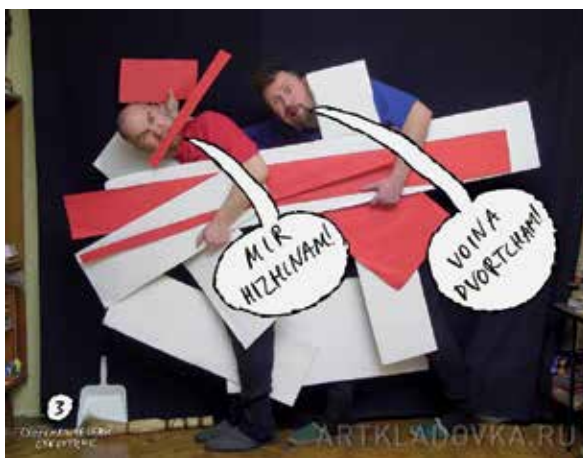
Russian Actionism which develops in this atmosphere refers to the experience of the Situationist International movement. The artistic climate of the nineties is formed by artists such as Anatoly Osmolovsky, Oleg Kulik, David Ter-Oganyan and Alexander Brener. Spontaneously organized in public space, balancing on the edge of the law, their actions must be read in the context of the dismantling of the communist regime mechanisms and analysis of the liberalization processes taking place after the collapse of the system. Analysing the Russian art scene after the breakdown of the communist regime, Ekaterina Degot indicates a shift in the paradigm of art which goes beyond aesthetic categories, as well as its political context. Actionism reveals anxiety with the transient identification of Russian awareness against the background of chaos, caused by the disappointment with market economy which in Russian reality often operated beyond legal regulations, thus increasing crime, and finally the war in Chechnya²⁰.

¹⁹ Pavel Mityenko's lecture „История акционизма: от Осмоловского до Pussy Riot” (“History of Actionism from Osmolovsky to Pussy Riot”), accessed on 7 January 2013, <http://theoryandpractice.ru/posts/4391-5-luchshikh-lektsiy-nedeli-audio>.

²⁰ Degot (1995).



Ill. 4. The Blue Noses, Photography from the cycle *Today's yurodivy*, 1999



Ill. 5. The Blue Noses, Photography from the cycle *Suprematic Subotnik*, 2004

In 1995, Alexander Brener performed an action on the Red Square in Moscow titled *The first glove*. On a frosty winter day, the artist stood on Lobnoye mesto in front of the Kremlin's windows, wearing shorts and boxing gloves, and challenged Russian President Boris Yeltsin for a duel. His calls “Yeltsin, get out!” were echoed with his colleague's words



Ill. 6. The Blue Noses, Photography from the cycle *Kitchen Suprematism*, 2005

Słaba jakość fotografii !!!



Ill. 7. The Blue Noses, Photography from the cycle *Fucking Fascism*, 1998

“Get out, you despicable coward”²¹. The artist’s gesture who challenged the authority, reveals the unequal distribution of power held by potential rivals. The artistic provocation raises a question about the limits of freedom in the context of socio-political transformation and the remains of the Soviet power mechanisms.

Bluff and mocking gestures of artists from the Blue Noses group (Viacheslav Mizin, Alexander Shaburov) are an attempt to deal with political oppression. Photographs from the cycle *Today’s yurodivy* (1999, ill. 4) and *Spring fantasies (Wholesale and retail resistance)* (2003) show men stripped to their underwear, lining up against places of worship and state buildings. Explicitly referring to the tradition of the yurodivy, the Blue Noses group choose all flashpoints that abound in national stereotypes, political conflicts, and historical traumas

overwhelming the awareness as a fertile field for their actions.

The reality of the post-communist country is one of the main references in the works of the Blue Noses. A photo from the *Suprematic Subotnik* (ill. 5) cycle refers to the unpaid work carried out for the public good on days off in the times of the Soviet Union. A similar phenomenon, i.e. the so-called community service existed also in the People’s Republic of Poland. Artists posing for a photo try to take away red and white cardboards in their arms. The simple geometric planes uniquely refer to the avant-garde art. The interpretation of the act of cleaning is problematic. Is it a parody of what the Russian authorities made with avant-garde art by legitimizing socialist realism? Or is it rather an ironic attitude to art that took part in the political game, participating in the work of building the new world. The picture is accompanied by the words uttered by the artists, “Peace to huts. Death to palaces.” The series of photographs *Kitchen Suprematism* from 2005 (ill. 6) reveals an ambiguous attitude to the artistic tradition of the first half of the twentieth century. ‘Abstract’ forms have been cut out of bread and cheap sausage which are symbols of Soviet everyday reality. Consistently following the path of taking off masks, the group blurs the boundaries between the high and the low, and approaches common life which goes on in the kitchen among pots²². This attitude is evident in the *Tiap-lap art* from 2004 which becomes an artistic statement. Art that is easy to carry out is devoid of the aura of an authentic, original work. Artists often take series of photographs in several editions, bringing them closer to a mass production²³. The attitude towards the commercialization of Russian contemporary art remains ambivalent. They reveal the mechanisms of its functioning, bringing them to the absurd.

In their works, the group take up the issues of the Holocaust and trauma. A series of pictures taken in 1998 and resumed in 2006 was shown at the exhibition *Fucking Fascism* (2007, ill. 7) at the Guelman Gallery in Moscow. The photographs show naked bodies of men and women. The men, far from the ideals of Aryan supermen, have paper swastikas affixed to their crotches, and their penises poke through them, held erect by nooses attached to hands raised in Nazi salutes. Sudden

²¹ КОВАЛЕВ (2007: 172–173).

²² Ерофеев (2000–2012).

²³ Шабуров (2000–2012).

movements expose the artists' pretentiousness. Here nudity is associated with the stripping of human dignity, which in everyday life is emphasized by formal dresses demonstrating the seriousness of men's gestures. In another work, *Monkeys against fascism* from 2006, the Blue Noses collective have also used the symbol of swastika on which a monkey defecates. This act pushes the symbol of the totalitarian power into the realm of degradation. On the other hand, uncontrolled body relaxation accompanies strong emotions related to fear. These extreme conditions of human experience are similar to death, the ultimate degradation.

Animals appear in the works of Oleg Kulik, being a metaphor for human relationships. The work *Russian* (1999) has its roots in folk culture, in the tale of the goose that laid the golden eggs. Here, the place of the goose has been taken by a race dog (English bulldog) – a symbol of New Russians who got rich after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The presentation refers to the mentality of the Russian man, encoded in the national culture, who looks at the greats of this world with delight and honour. The capitalist system has not fulfilled the hopes of a better life. Deep political and social changes associated with the collapse of the communist regime have led to the re-polarization and division of society into two layers, unequal in terms of their legal privileges – a small group of dominant men in the political and economic sphere as well as the rest of society expelled, however, beyond the margin of visibility.

A dog is a recurring motif in Kulik's works. The animal, as related to the yurodivy, is a symbol of loneliness and humiliation²⁴. There is a significant performance of yurodivy Simeon of Emesa who saw the dead animal at the gates of Emesa, removed his belt, tied it behind him and went to the town. Small children playing nearby began to shout: "Here comes a crazy abba" and began to run after him and beat him. This gesture of compassion and empathy to a weaker creature correlates with contemporary post-humanistic thought. Anthropocentric worldview assumed superiority of human beings over nature which they tried by all means to dominate, to control, to make personal use of it. Post-humanism places human beings back in a complex system which they form together with other creatures. This is what Kulik says: "Man will

be saved by humiliation and contempt (...). Both Superman and Mass Man – carefully hiding Superman in himself – have no future. The future is in fact post-humanist. Man is neither the king of nature nor the crown of creation; he is only one of the biological species populating our planet (...)"²⁵

The artist is consistent in his views, bringing the idea to the end which is also its reversal. In the project *Family of the future* created in 1998, he sees the possibility of coexistence with animals. The work is yet another provocation of the artist. It makes us discover the Other in ourselves. Animals have often functioned in culture as a metaphor for human relations. The answer to the question about the origins of mankind's constant pursuit of the idea of superman does not seem simple. The work *Kama Sutra* from the above-mentioned cycle corresponds to the series *Wrestlers* by Sergey Shutov from 2007. The artist used small figurines of batmen, spidermen and other supermen which he covered with red silicone paste. The carnality, or even meatiness of the children's figurines, tangled in an embrace, cause anxiety. At first, it is not possible to recognize whether they fight or play with each other, or maybe they are entangled in a love embrace²⁶.

The *Pussy Riot* punk-group²⁷ uses an ambiguous artistic strategy, broadening the experience of Actionism with other forms of expression. The team have been organizing their shows illegally in public spaces in Moscow since 2011. They act by surprise, occupying a space for a short time, introducing a dissonance to the monotonous reality. The group members use strong, perplexing vocabulary to galvanize random "audience".

The first *Pussy Riot*'s actions took place in subway stations, on the roofs of city buses and trams – in the most crowded places where people go to work or return home at peak hours. The group also made their performances in exclusive neighbourhoods of Moscow, in expensive boutiques, or at fashion shows, thus criticizing the conformism of the economic elite. The show that Pussy Riot made in the main sacred space of the Russian Orthodox Church – the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow in February 2012 caused the strongest response. Five members of the group sang *Mother of God, chase Putin away* inside the temple, thus criti-

²⁴ Wodziński (2009: 47–48).

²⁵ Gorzadek (2000).

²⁶ Шытов (n.d.).

²⁷ Pussy Riot's blog: <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/>

cizing the entanglement of the conservative Orthodox Church with state-building processes in Russia. As a result, three of the group members were accused of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred, while two of them were sentenced to a labour camp for several years. The girls performed their show during Maslenitsa related to Bakhtin's tradition of carnival, allowing the behaviour beyond the social norms.

The *Pussy Riot*'s project is a radical gesture, aimed to reveal the absence of the female voice in public space. The artists' costumes are significant. These are coloured, monochromatic dresses matched with contrasting tights. Bright colours, evoking associations with emotions, are reserved for women, traditionally tied to the domestic sphere. The *Pussy Riot* members have balaclavas on their heads which they make with their own hands, cutting out holes in the caps for the eyes and mouth. Patterns on the caps evoke associations with needlework and the myth of Arachne, a woman who joined in the competition with Athene, and was turned into a spider. Deep fear of the creature is encoded in the collective unconscious²⁸. At the same time it fascinates and inspires awe. In her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*²⁹, Julia Kristeva uses a category of "abject" to describe disgust. *Abject* locates itself wherever the human is threatened by the matter, constantly slipping out of control. The *Pussy Riot* play a game with surreal tradition, they symbolically deprive themselves of the heads by wearing the face-concealing balaclavas. The disturbing ambivalence of states on the border of life and death has the potential subversive to the cultural norms.

The balaclava is also an attribute of a female terrorist. The rebellion, however, is ambiguous. The inability to use clear categories constitutes the character of the Russian group's actions. Occupying public space, they provoke audience with strong, sometimes vulgar vocabulary. These aggressive gestures, however, have a certain flaw. The lightly dressed female bodies at the same time reveal their vulnerability.

The current Russian art is a sensitive seismograph detecting changes in the political and social spheres of the Russian state. It consciously locates itself in seemingly neutral areas, revealing hidden mechanisms of power. The artists comment on re-

ality perversely, speaking from inside the system, and not providing clear answers. They use the arsenal of everyday language in public speeches, exploring the common, and therefore invisible. The crumbling structures of the socialist system have revealed large areas of social reality, previously located in the shadow of the official system, and with them – poverty, and alcoholism. Along with these processes, the use of profanity, vocabulary often derived from criminal jargon has become more common in different social areas³⁰. Reaching for this language, artists use it subversively as a whistle-blowing tool. They remove distanced observers from their safe position, pulling them into a game of affects. They show a distorting mirror to society, just like the yurodivy.

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²⁸ Leszkowicz (2012: 50).

²⁹ Kristeva (2007).

³⁰ Afanasyev (2005: 225–226).

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Masks and camouflage. Some notes on a postcolonial in-between space of the trickster

„I am an abandoned product of a failed experiment, a hybrid of cultures and identities, a contradiction in terms. Born into an upside-down world at the tail end of the millennium, my only responsibility is to this time and place.“¹

Prelude

A white man sits on a chair. Rakishly his hands protrude over the armrests. We see a pick-up truck in the background. A plastic tent on a parking lot indicates a street or flea market situation in a suburban area. In the foreground a selection of masks are laid out on the floor. The chair is doubled in the empty chair next to the sitter. While he wears black shoes, black pants and a black shirt, his jacket stands out due to its army green color and camouflage patterns. There is one prominent distortion in this image though – he wears a rubber mask. This mask carries the features of the first democratically elected president of post-Apartheid South Africa – Nelson Mandela.

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As a documentation of a performance, this photograph exists at least in two versions that vary mainly

in the positioning of the legs and in the distance to the portrayed. There is a black and white version that is reproduced less often than the colored one.² Despite the differences, the essence of the images remains the same: A white man stages himself in a market like situation, wearing a latex Mandela mask. The scenario alludes to stands for tourists looking for an “authentic” “African” product to take home. This photograph by the South African artist Kendell Geers titled, *Portrait of the artist as a young man*³, dates back to 1993, one year before Nelson Mandela was elected to office and three years after he had been released out of prison (ill. 1). An intermediate time in the political and social landscape of South Africa that one could describe as a historical rupture, as a gap between systems and ideologies that embodied a promise for the future with an underlying tension – the Damocles’ sword of civil war was in the air. Kendell Geers offers himself in

² For the less often reproduced version see e.g.: Herkenhoff (2007: 36).

³ There is also an obvious allusion through the title to James Joyce’s work with the same name from 1917. Joyce’s work itself is an adaptation of the Greek mythological figure of Daedalus, the father of Icarus. This aspect shall be mentioned only aside here. Daedalus is usually understood as the creator, artist and architect and embeds Geers’ work therefore within this trajectory. Daedalus first appearance in Homer’s metamorphosis is as the stage designer for Ariadne.

¹ Colours (1996: 36).



III. 1. Kendell Geers, *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, performance/photograph, 1993, Courtesy of Kendell Geers

this moment as a doubled-faced, double-identity individual. His white body is loaded as a relic of an institutionalized racism called Apartheid, and embedded within a Christian trajectory of Afrikaner dominance. The mask he wears comes from a supposedly better future.

There are three concepts that I shall try to put in relation to each other within this setting: identity, post-colonial existences and the notion of the trickster.⁴

II

Through the theoretical groundwork of such scholars like Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha or Paul Gilroy,

to name but a few, the questioning of predominant ideas on how a yet-to-be-defined center imagined itself and its “Other”; the (de-)construction of identity became not a commonplace in artistic and curatorial work right away, but we can see retrospectively an increasingly strong and more and more stratified challenge to such notions as what the “center” or a so called “West” might be. With the rise of postcolonialism as a more widespread framework among exhibition makers and artistic practitioners throughout the 1990s, a truly broad set of works found its way into the art world that tried to re-negotiate its position in a still predominantly white, male and eurocentric art system. To briefly summarize only two strategies: notions of the “Self” and the “Other” were either undermined from an outer perspective, or the “center” was infiltrated from within its own boundaries by the means of its own language. South Africa, that is, the geopolitical setting of the country at the end of the Apartheid era, represents a seminal case study for such fields as center-periphery relations and in particular for the area of identity discourses. More specifically, though, I want to argue that Kendell Geers’ performance/photograph should not only be understood in terms of postcolonial and identity discourses. Together with Homi Bhabha’s notion of the *In-Between*, I want to argue that this specific performance/photograph can be read as both: postcolonial strategy and as a manifestation of the trickster.⁵

Kendell Geers works from an artistic, cultural and political starting point that must be understood as having emerged out of the realms of the displaced, out of a paradoxical Afrikaner-African-ness, an intermediate space in locale and time. This is set against a historical backdrop that has roots in the specificities of South African history. I shall argue that Geers – or moreover the figure he creates – embodies an ontological function that can be attributed to what in other contexts is called the trickster figure.⁶

⁴ My presentation with the title *Trading Identities – From White Snowballs, African Masks and Turkish Knitting. On the shifts in identity constructions in contemporary art practices* at the conference *Trickster Strategies in the Artists’ and Curatorial Practice* in Wrocław in 2011 I took Kendell Geers work as one starting point and aimed at a broader overview, including the works of African-American artist David Hammons and the German-Turkish artists Nevin Aladag and Nasan Tur working currently in Berlin. For this paper the focus will be mainly on Kendell Geers’ work *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

⁵ See in particular Bhabha (2010: 57) and Bhabha (2010: 338).

⁶ There are also important media related issues connected to *Portrait of the artist as a young man*, such as the performative act and the photograph as documentation versus the photograph and the performance as equal works. In this context this problem shall be only mentioned here but not further investigated in this paper.

Let us get back to the image first though. The encounter of the white body with the black mask has had manifold precursors in art and visual history. I shall briefly mention two examples here.

In 1926 Man Ray produced a series of photographs with the model Kiki de Montparnasse that became inextricably connected to the history of photography and the gaze onto the seemingly authentic, African mask, as Wendy Grossman has smartly pointed out in her publication *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens*.⁷

One photograph of Kiki de Montparnasse with a Baule Mbolo type mask from the Ivory coast, titled “noire et blanc”, remains for its composition and clarity of visual language an often cited example for the employment of a western gaze, implying the objectification of the “Other”. While we do encounter here a double objectification – the one of the mask and the one of the woman – we also find a whole history of the appropriation of the mask into western concepts of art and art history. Already in 1907 Pablo Picasso famously painted his *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.)*, which became another notoriously referenced work for the “embrace of non-Western art by Western artists in the twentieth century”⁸, a “lightening rod for contentious issues of race, gender, and colonialism”⁹ and an example for the (mis)use of the mask and the appropriation of Africa as an aesthetic idea into European art under European terms. Kendell Geers’ work must be read in this visual history of a (mis-)usage of the mask. Yet Geers offers an interesting adaptation of the leitmotif *black mask – white body*.¹⁰ His interpretation is at least two-fold. He displays the Kitsch-masks in front of him and shows them as what they are in the end of the day: commodities that satisfy a fetishized need of the Western market. And he displays himself, or more precisely his body behind the mask. A body that carries the load of the history of the colonizer, including the ambiguity of his very own existence as a born South African. Somebody who is from there, yet somehow does not belong there either:

“I am a stranger in the country of my birth by virtue of being too European in my appearance and

culture. But at the same time, I am unwelcome in Europe on account of my being too African.”¹¹

III

Coming back to the underpinning theoretical concepts I see at stake here, let us take a look at one moment in particular. The Afro-Caribbean-British theoretician Stuart Hall spoke in his various books and publications on cultural identity often with the help of semiotically based concepts of binary opposites. By employing notions of “Us” and “Them”, “Self” and “Other” on cultural productions and its conditions, he laid one of the seminal foundations for a reading of visual representations, especially of black diasporic cultures.¹² Homi Bhabha’s *Location of Culture* from 1994 though, offers a notion that works exactly in that space that is situated in between the two.¹³ Neither “Self” nor “Other”, neither “Us” nor “Them” but exactly what seems to happen in an ontological moment of ambiguity between them.

In contrast to Man Ray’s photograph, Geers superimposes the mask and the body. Wearing the Mandela mask he is not only “Self” and “Other”, not only colonizer and colonized. He collapses the two. He *is* all the contradiction he represents in this very moment. A white African and colonizer, yet he *becomes* Mandela in the actual use of the mask, wears the camouflage jacket of the freedom fighter, and stands therewith for a multiple in-between form, a hybrid. Bhabha theorized moments of hybridity especially with regard to South Africa mostly through looking at the group of the Colored.¹⁴ That group of people, that fell between both systems, being neither white nor black. If we leave the phenotypical dimension in favor for an ontological one, I believe that Bhabha’s concept of the in-between and hybridity, also applies to Geers’ *Portrait of the artist as a young man*. Geers creates, or more precisely amplifies, the socio-political and historical in-betweenness of that precise moment. From Apartheid toward democracy, from strict color lines toward the *rainbow-nation*, Geers’ self-portrait marks that exact gap between them. As Bhabha writes in relation to Nadine Gordimer’s novel *My Son’s Story*:

⁷ Grossman (2009).

⁸ Grossman (2009: 11).

⁹ Grossman (2009: 11).

¹⁰ See also Frantz Fanon here and his canonical work *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs* from 1952.

¹¹ Williamson (2009: 248).

¹² See e.g. Hall (2011).

¹³ Bhabha (2010).

¹⁴ Bhabha (2010: 17).

"This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge, which like the coloured South African subject represents a hybridity, a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive "image" at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world."¹⁵

It is in this specific setting that not only the post-colonial hybrid – but also the trickster can emerge.

IV

We have witnessed different manifestations of the trickster throughout history – whether it be Hermes of ancient Greece, or Loki of the northern countries of Europe. Doubtlessly each of them has to be looked at in their specific cultural and time-bound context. Yet, for the sake of my argument here, I want to stress one thread that seems to run through many trickster figures – the movability. The trickster is "neither first cause nor last end. He is an exemplar of wit in action, (...) as he bounces back from beyond every beyond (...)." ¹⁶

The trickster seems to move easily between the realms of the profane and the divine, between heaven and earth.¹⁷ And that is among many things for one specific reason: he is neither one nor the other. He relates to both, the gods and man, heaven and earth, the good and the bad. The ability that makes it possible for him to mock the mighty and show them their own flaws is that he operates out of a gap between classes, cultures and time-space relations. Hermes does not only move as a messenger from the gods between Olympus and Earth. He operates in the space between the two and this is where he also evolved out of and acts from morally. Hermes plays both: the Apollonian lyra and the Dionysian flute, that is, he masters the tones of order and chaos alike. Hermes also traded the ability of soothsaying from Apollo, while he never could promise to tell all the truth. He reigns over a shining in-between kingdom of true lies and false truths, as Rolf Beyer pointed out.¹⁸

Kendell Geers is, as Fiona Bradley writes:

"(...)BOTH A LIAR AND A LIE, A PERSONA AS MUCH AS A PERSON. HE IS AN AUTHORIAL VOICE CONSTRUCTED IN AND FOR THE ARTIST'S WORK, AN IDENTITY ALMOST EVERY ELEMENT OF WHICH IS CONSTRUCTED."¹⁹

And finally Christine Macel so rightly stated that if Geers played a game, it is that one of cheating and camouflage, where not a single truth, not even his own truth remains readable. For Geers, coming out of a historic situation, where the good and the bad have become loosely interchangeable terms there are no truths any more.²⁰

Coming back to Homi Bhaba one more time, we do find in his conclusive thoughts in *The Location of Culture* one point borrowed from Gayatri Spivak, that brings together what is at stake here. It is not only the historic locale that enables Geers to become the trickster figure we see in *Portrait of the artist as a young man*; it is the time, moreover, the rupture on the timeline and the gap opening that makes his existence possible in the first place:

"I am persuaded that it is the catachrestic post-colonial agency of 'seizing the value-coding' (...) that opens up an interruptive time-lag in the 'progressive' myth of modernity, and enables the diasporic and the postcolonial to be represented."²¹

It is precisely in that "interruptive time-lag" the opened up between 1990 and 1994 in which Geers appears as the trickster, who neither belongs fully to Apartheid, nor fully to the time thereafter. He appears as a strange double-faced creature that looks at us, precisely from, and only out of this moment, when the ever-enhancing project of modernity stumbled over something called revolution and a crack splits open that allows him to emerge.

Fin

The light blue plastic tent in the background rustles in *Portrait of the artist as a young man* – Kendell Geers does not only wear a Mandela mask. He dresses in what he called the fashion of the contemporary gods of Africa today: the camouflage.²² And thereby becomes. The military dress of the freedom

¹⁵ Bhabha (2010: 19).

¹⁶ Pelton (1980: 282).

¹⁷ Compare here: Beyer (2009).

¹⁸ Beyer (2009).

¹⁹ Bradley (2002: 211).

²⁰ Macel (2002: 217).

²¹ Bhabha (2010: 344).

²² Stated in an interview conducted with the author of this paper in August 2011 in Berlin.

fighter quickly changes to the one of the terrorist also. Which of the two is what depends merely on perspective and moments of history. He operates not only from a historical in-between time, but also from within the gap of history. Seated on a chair, he rules over a kingdom of the indefinite. He mocks the old Gods of white supremacy, but also takes the promise of the new gods not too serious. And therewith, he is neither one, nor the other. Embedded in the visual history of the representations of Otherness, the misinterpretation of the masks and the guerilla fighter, this (anti-)hero wearing camouflage, collapses all of them within a historical moment of transition. In this canyon suddenly splitting open in 1990, where seemingly fixed identities became lose, a sea of shifting signifiers purls with empty promises, we hear pledges of a near future and tumbling shots from the past roar in the back. He moves between the gods and the humans. Like Hermes, this *Artist as a Young Man* behind his market stand is the god of the gamblers, thieves and salesmen at once. Like an apparition from somewhere else he suddenly sits in front of us. Praises the masks for sale we think we know, laughing at us from behind the grin of the face of hope and change, daring us to not believe any of them, neither the old nor the new truths. Geers doesn't need the wings on his shoes to fly up to Olympus and sail down to earth. He sits in his chair and is all of it at once. He tricks us of who he actually is as he presses the button to have his portrait made with an auto-timer, out of that peculiar rupture in time and place. Only from there a cacophonous kaleidoscope of multi-perspectivity shows it all: all the truths and all the lies at once.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Hero's revolutionary song. Istvan Kantor aka Monty Cantsin

By definition, *trickster* is one of the most important and most interesting archetypes in culture connected with religion, mythology and literature. It describes a being, which acts in defiance of established rules and rights, very often assuming the attitude of a rebel or both a fool and a sage. Trickster creates and destroys, pulling various illicit tricks, very often showing the truth and the good by that means. In my opinion, the trickster attitude appears somehow also in a neoist artistic strategy of uncontrollable and anarchistic Istvan Kantor, the activist, who employs the performatic language of an artistic statement, aided by new media. I will try to present the artist's profile in the most faithful way, while acknowledging that it will still be only a partial image of the chosen activities.

Istvan Kantor

Istvan Kantor, a Hungarian-Canadian artist, regarded as one of the most controversial and rebellious creators of the contemporary art, was born on 27th August 1949 in Budapest. As a young boy he survived the Hungarian Uprising (1956) – today known as the Hungarian Revolution – which had a direct influence on the topics he chose in his later artistic activities. In the 70's he studied medicine and got involved in the activity of the Budapest ar-

tistic underground, which generally concentrated around Laszlo Beke – one of the main characters of the Hungarian avant-garde of the 60's and 70's. At that time David Zack, an artist of world's *Mail Art*, also appeared in the local *Young Artists' Club*¹ – a person who had an invaluable influence on the shaping of young Kantor's artistic personality. Kantor and Zack met in 1975, a year later they both left Hungary – Zack went to Portland and Kantor to Paris.

France, for Kantor, was only a short stop, a place where he lived a normal life of an ordinary refugee or a street musician. He left after some time and moved to Montreal, where – as he himself mentioned – he started a new life from scratch, in a totally different environment. Not immediately did he become an artist. As a typical immigrant, at first, he worked as a cleaner, a washer or a machine operator – he consider it to be his first meeting with the “hard-core capitalist exploitation”². At that time – which is quite important – he began to look at art in a really serious way and started working on his individual artistic projects. In 1978 he left for Portland, where he settled in with David Zack and Blaster Al Ackerman.

¹ Baird (2004).

² Baird (2004).

You could say, that from that moment Kantor would be seen as a fully-formed artist reaching a dramatic turning point in his career – thanks to David Zack in 1978 he would assume the name *Monty Cantsin*, and in 1979, living back in Montreal he would become the main figure of *neoism* and begin his spectacular *Blood Campaign* and *X-Blood*.

Monty Cantsin and Neoism

What exactly is Monty Cantsin (ill. 1) and Neoism? The Monty Cantsin figure assumed by Istvan Kantor in 1978 is a form of a collective identity, which was created in 1978 by David Zack, Al Ackerman and Maris Kundzins. Monty Cantsin was supposed to be a star of *Pop Open Source* – which meant, that everyone could become/create this identity, everyone could build it's history and use it's possible achievements and attributes hence becoming immortal. This is how David Zack described the birth of Monty Cantsin:

„Maris and I were in Portland. We'd been working with a Xerox 3107 that makes big copies and reductions. We were making giant folios; monster folios and dinosaur folios we called them. And one night Maris started fooling around with the tape recorder, singing songs in Latvian about toilets and traffic. Well, we decided to make a pop star out of Maris. But it had to be an open pop star, that is, anyone who wanted could assume the personality of the pop star. This open pop star would be the most talented in history, better than Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Sal Mineo and even Ry Cooder all rolled together in one. Pop stars have always been special to me, growing up the son of a symphony conductor the way I did. To me they stand for rebellion and acceptance, revolution and success and a whole lot of other things at the same time. We were mouthing Maris Kundzins' name, and it came out Monty Cantsins. Then we got to saying can't sin and can't sing and quite a few other things to give the impression that this pop star could be a thief as well as a saint.”³

The idea of Monty Cantsin is also linked to the phenomenon of Open Pop Star, connected with the critical movement of the 60's and 70's, which glorified fame. Open Pop Star based on the *multiple-use name* strategy, which meant, that every per-



Ill. 1. Monty Cantsin outline, from A Neoist research Project (open source publication)

son could use the name of a famous person to sign his own works, achievements or ventures – consequently it leads to creating an Open Pop Star⁴ figure, so willingly used by Kantor.

The idea is also connected with neoism, which began as a movement in the late 60's in the US and Canada (it came to Europe in 1982 – *European Training Camp* (Würzburg), and was linked to the movement against progressing greedy art market⁵. Generally you might say, that neoism grew out of *Mail Art*, inspired by the futuristic and dadaist activities, Fluxus or the punk movement – which is very visible in Istvan's performances. For Kantor, an event organized in February of 1979 in Montreal was a very significant one. It was *The Mail Art Show – The Brain in the Mail*.

The term “neoism” was coined by Kantor in May of 1979, as he himself mentions, he needed something, but he didn't know exactly what it was supposed to be and this term – neoism – seemed the most fitting. The manifesto said: *Neoism has no manifesto*. You may say, that the first neoist provocation took place on 22nd May 1979, on the elec-

³ Source: http://poewiki.org/index.php?title=To%C5%9B%C4%87_zbiorowa, viewed on 13 September 2012.

⁴ Krajewski: <http://krajewskimarek.blox.pl/2007/10/Open-pop-star.html>, viewed on 13 September 2012.

⁵ Antoszek (1998:17).

tion day in Montreal. At the intersection of McGill and Sherbrooke, Kantor placed his *Neoism Chair* asking passers-by to sit on it looking what would come out of it. Take in into consideration that it was the election day, the intrigued people were convinced it was a part of some political campaign and listened to the artist's vague communicates about that neoism really is. According to neoists there is no objective and immutable reality consisting of constant values – only the act and the activity are important, as they become the part of a neoist universe. The *multiple-use name* rule is a kind of declaration of the rejection of an artist-recipient role division, allowing the neoist performance to assume a form of random, spontaneous and rebellious artistic activities which are always a part of the neoist/universal creation.

Performance

To be able to talk about Kantor's art, it is essential to know certain features characterizing a neoist *performance*, in the absence of which it is very difficult to understand the real meaning of that kind of activities. It must be kept in mind that a performance should make use items specific for the epoch, therefore it should be rough, parodist, unpredictable, using non-linear narration, and not based on the viewers' expectations. In this act, the line between the creator and the recipient blurs very often – which means a total rejection of the division of roles – connected with the collective identity described beforehand. Kantor's performance is also based primarily on action, because the neoist artist identifies reality with action, without which the idea becomes only a shapeless postulate⁶. While experiencing Kantor's show, each time one is introduced into a seemingly incomprehensible – yet engaging – (para)opera performance, which is composed of a variety of means of expression – both visual and auditory. Invariably for years, Kantor assumes the character of a rebel in a military suit equipped with items/props of a truly revolutionary/propagandist significance. Singing – or rather shouting the slogans of his songs to the march rhythm – he somehow compliments the video pieces (also encompassing a somewhat irrational in nature) screened simultaneously with his perfor-

mance. This as a whole produces a unique, slightly psychotic atmosphere of Kantor's revolt.

It is repeated, that Kantor's area of interest oscillates around issues such as: robotics and carnality, crisis and conflict, revolution, and the corruption associated with technological progress. It is worth remembering that Kantor does not turn away from the technology – just like in the early '70s when he was fascinated by it, the fascination continues today. His approach hasn't changed, but rather his perception of the system, which provides and controls technology. That is why Kantor openly calls out to the media guerillas for a partisan confrontation with the institutions:

"So, I ask you now, dear automated zombies, in the times of shinism, when the leaders of the global power parade in your cities, spending billions, while you cannot even afford to cover the cost of your non-budget productions, will you dare, you, the media -guerillas, to confront, putting the camera to their heads?"⁷

The former, wonderful McLuhan's dream called the *global village*⁸, according to Kantor, is out of control, it is bombing the today's society with completely useless, manipulative, information technology pulp, which better than most weapons is able to effectively fool the people who blindly believe the media message, and leads to a devaluation of the essential values. What is more, he believes, that "technology is necessary, but giving up to those who control it only for profit – is not necessary at all"⁹.

It is also worth remembering, that in his works, Istvan Kantor refers to the area of the art market – he asks about the current position of the artist and about his freedom and not being corrupted. "How, then, should a young promising media artist act, if he wants to make a career? Wearing a mask of a fighter, armed with a Wi-Fi enhanced laptop, right after graduating from the academy or university, he must enter the realm of the corporate business, supported by commercial galleries, contemporary art museums, foundations, banks, curators, publishers and collectors"¹⁰. Kantor says – not without a reason, in my opinion – that every, even the most rebellious and irrational, of the off proj-

⁶ Antoszek (1998: 17).

⁷ Kantor (n.d.).

⁸ Pisarek (2006: 69)

⁹ Kantor (n.d.).

¹⁰ Kantor (n.d.).

ects, that attacks the institutionalized machine, are immediately sucked into this machine thus becoming institutionalized themselves.

Selected works and projects

At the end of the 70s in Montreal, Istvan Kantor began a series of controversial *Blood Campaign* interventions, in which the blood of the artist was the main medium. *Blood Campaign* mainly consisted in – often public – drawing of his own blood and using it for various actions. Eventually, the blood was supposed to become an object of art, which, according to regulations that ruled the relatively active art market, was to be sold for investment purposes.

By selling these works of art, the artist was able to finance the neoist movement. Nearly 500 *Blood Campaign* events took place, during which the transactions were made and what is interesting – apparently – in 1984 the price of blood reached the staggering price of 1 million dollars per 1 ml¹¹. The blood drawn by the artist during interventions also changed into the medium of an artistic expression, through which the artist created a truly evocative compositions of blood splashed on the walls, canvases, or... the audience gathered. These actions very often took place alongside the singing of *electro-pop* songs, which were a mixture of *new wave* and *industrial* music, Hungarian folk songs and *neoism* manifesto. An indispensable addition to these actions was Kantor characterization – the military clothes and a typical punk hairstyle. When asked about the fascination with blood Kantor says that blood is a very useful part of his body, which he has easy access to, and, in addition, because as he used to study medicine, being a male-nurse in a sense – he was able to use it in his projects¹².

X-BLOOD

The Blood X Gift (Blood Donation X), a guerrilla project, is a part of the *Blood Campaign*. It includes painting, or rather splattering the walls of museums/institutions with his own blood in the shape of a capital letter “X”, without the agreement from neither the museum authorities, direc-

tors nor curators (ills. 2–7). The actions performed consequently led to police interventions, multiple arrests and court cases against the artist. *Blood X* – although it may appear otherwise – is usually a scrupulously planned and carefully thought-out project, in which the place of the operation is carefully selected and time precisely calculated¹³.

The essential elements of such interventions are: reading aloud of the manifesto and the act of handing over of the document describing the work created, which is to be given to the particular institution. This action was first performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal in 1985, where the intervention did not go according to the artist’s plan, because it was so quick that the guards did not notice any act of vandalism – the only witnesses were the camera man and the photographer who were immortalizing Kantor’s action. Kantor wanted to formalize his intervention at all costs, so he found the guards and the director of the museum and gave him the documentation of the *Blood Campaign* coupled with the donation act of the work called *Cadeau* (Gift)¹⁴. During the various projects of *X-Gift* it also happened, that while splattering a wall between two Picasso paintings, a drop of blood landed on one of them – for which, of course, Kantor was obliged to pay a lot of money in damage (Museum of Modern Art, New York 1988). One of the most known interventions was an action of 2004, when the artist chose Hamburger Bahnhof for his unofficial Berlin performance. During the intervention the *X-Gift* was placed on the wall next to the famous sculpture of Michael Jackson by Paul McCarthy. This type of performances took place also in the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), Museum of Modern Art (New York), Museum of Contemporary Art (Montreal), Ludwig Museum (Cologne), etc.

At this point it is worth to mention the event that took place at The Art Gallery Ontario in Toronto »as it proceeded quite differently than the previous ones. The situation was unusual, because the gallery has been renovated for over a year already. [...] This time, neither the Police nor the court interventions were necessary. Kantor splashed his blood on fresh

¹¹ Kantor: http://www.ccca.ca/performance_artists/k/kantor/kantor_perf18/making_inv_gift.html, viewed on 13 September 2012.

¹² Baird (2004).

¹³ Kantor: http://www.ccca.ca/performance_artists/k/kantor/kantor_perf18/blood/artcrimes.html, viewed on 13 September 2012.

¹⁴ Kantor: http://www.ccca.ca/performance_artists/k/kantor/kantor_perf18/blood/artcrimes.html, viewed on 13 September 2012.

III. 2.
Istvan Kantor, *Gift*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988, photo: courtesy of the artist



III. 3.
Istvan Kantor, *Gift*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988, photo: courtesy of the artist



III. 4.
Istvan Kantor, *Ideal gift*, The National Gallery of Canada, 1991, photo: courtesy of the artist





Ill. 5. Istvan Kantor, *Ideal gift*, The National Gallery of Canada, 1991, photo: courtesy of the artist



Ill. 6. Istvan Kantor, *Xmas gift*, 1989, The Art Gallery of Ontario, photo: courtesy of the artist



Ill. 7. Istvan Kantor, *Xmas gift*, 1989, The Art Gallery of Ontario, photo: courtesy of the artist

concrete, which is used to build new walls of the gallery. The conclusion could have been as follows: Radical anarchic gesture turned into a discrete sign of the organic compound. Even the title of this action is significant – “Invisible Gift” «¹⁵.

APARTMENT FESTIVALS (APTs)

The form of pure neoist activity – in which Istvan Kantor participated actively – was called *Apartment Festival*, run between 1980–1988, and continued between 1997–2004. APTs were a form of cyclical, irregular, and sometimes very long meetings, during which a variety of artistic activities took place – mostly in neoists’ private flats. Beside the creative acts presentations, Festivals were based on shared life experiences – discussions, exercises, sex, cooking, etc. First *Apartment Festival* took place in *No-Galero* in Montreal in 1980. Originally the term APTs was seen literally and all of the activities took place only in neoists private flats – which limited the influence it could have had on others. Soon, this understanding was extended, and the space for the *Apartment Festival* was expanded onto the whole city area, the neoist’s activities could have happened in every part of the urban area – apartments, clubs, sidewalk, beaches or parka. APTs also occurred in Baltimore, Toronto, New York, London, Ponte Nossa (Italy), Berlin and Montreal.

VIDEO

In addition to the interventions and performances Kantor is also active in the field of video art, in which he also created a distinctive and unique style of artistic expression. Using only two examples, I will try to explain the specificity of his works and highlight the features, that occur in almost every of the artist’s. While viewing these types of realizations, it is worth to pay attention to: autobiographical features, seemingly chaotic and non-sense narration, opera and theatrical conventions, pop aesthetics, numerous references to revolution, rhythm, the military, anarchy, found footage, vocals/scream/recitation, absurd, grotesque and the artist’s favorite sounds of tango.

The first video of Kantor, which I encountered by accident was a clip called *Revolutionary Song* (9:32, 2009). It was screened during the XII International Media Art Biennale WRO 07. In the catalog one can read: »The Revolutionary song pays

¹⁵ Konart (2006).

tribute to the chaos of film clips. It tells the story of sixteen-year-old Istvan, visiting Paris in 1966. Recalling his obligatory visit to the hairdresser and the conflict with his father, Kantor speaks about his favorite topics: the power and rebellion. On the way to the barber, under the “hopelessly blue sky”, in the era of a “hippie scum of the times”, the teenager prays for “an immediate disaster, destruction and conflagration” «¹⁶ *Revolutionary Song* undoubtedly refers to the episode of the Hungarian Revolution (1956), and also the May events of 1968 and the riots related to them, but in its general structure, the video does not carry any explicit moral message. It is worth drawing attention to the composition of writing, which in a sense echoes in most of the artist's videos. In my opinion, *Revolutionary Song* combines the features of a computer war game, a movie, a *found footage* film¹⁷ and a modern slightly pop-art video clip, combined with elements of a ironic and at times perverted commentary. In a characteristic – dirty, sensual, and sublime – rhythm of tango Kantor sings/shouts rebellious parts of the text, seemingly detached from reality, in the metaphorical way referring to the nature of the human and the nature of the world. Grotesqueness of form is complemented by the artist himself, who assumed the role of himself as the main character/actor in the clip. His distinctive anarchistic appearance, spasmodic gestures and rhythmic recitation create an image of a rebel and the whole picture of his work complete.

I agree fully with what Aleksandra Szewczak has written about the meaning of the *Revolutionary Song*: “Neoism implies action in the place of activity, it talks about the complete freedom and the opposition to labeling and to the squeezing into the limitations created by the definitions. In this context, we can consider Kantor's irritation with the established, unshakable order, symbolized and illustrated by the hopelessly blue sky. Kantor also mentions the stigma of the past, which is like the curse, although this is not important to the character of a rebel. The rebel here is free from assumptions arising derived from history. One simply is a rebel and a revolutionist. It lies within a man, and does not necessarily comes from the external environment”¹⁸.

A similar strategy is visible in *Born to Be Bad (Song of the Antihero)* – a video, which – in my opinion – can seemingly pass as a form of autobiographical song that tells a story of a rebellious and somewhat criminal past of the artist – who, at the time, was having troubles with the law, being repeatedly arrested. This piece of work is also a game with the topos and ethos of the hero sanctioned by the culture. A hero who is characterized by his heroism, by his readiness to sacrifice and by his acting according to moral standards. Again, we are dealing with Kantor's conviction of a rebellious human nature, torn by emotions and passions. The video, which was composed as a classic found footage, consisting of fragments taken from well-known movies. There, we find fragments of such movies as: *Sid and Nancy*, *James Bond*, *The Clockwork Orange*, *Alien*, *Femme Fatale* and *The Doors*. It seems that the scenes were carefully selected to illustrate the true human nature – as suggested – the evil one. According to the video, man is driven by the destruction, the hypocrisy, the violence, the deception, and the primitive instincts, which proves that he is evil by nature – in the video he is even compared to the monster – the Alien.

Last word

Istvan Kantor's artistic attitude and creativity can be considered controversial, relatively incomprehensible and somehow *trickstery*. His rebellious artist attitude tells him to remain in the state of being “against the tide” and reaching for solutions that may not always be permitted or easy. Using apparent chaos, rebellion, nonsense and grotesque the Hungarian-Canadian artist is always able to show us the world working according to his values. By that he tries to make us more sensitive to major problems that he notices. Obviously, he is not the first on to point out many of them, but the way in which he performs his activities or videos shows the originality of the artist's rebellious attitude, inspired by [...] such »„criminals”(as he calls them), as the Surrealists and the Dadaists who tried to resist the institutionalization of art by blending it into the everyday life, unleashing the spirit of opposition and revolt.«¹⁹. I highly recommend to participate in Kantor's “performances” because it is an unfor-

¹⁶ WRO'07 (2007: 53).

¹⁷ WRO'09 (2009: 72).

¹⁸ Szewczak (n.d.).

¹⁹ Kantor (n.d.).

gettable spectacle, leaving a significant mark on the perception of the real world.

I am aware of the fact that this text has not covered this vast topic – mainly because a significant number of works and projects by autonomous performances have been omitted by me. Nevertheless, I believe, though, that I have managed to shed a light on Istvan Kantor's works, as they deserve close attention.

Translation: Anna Blada

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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War mart: trickster strategies in war art and the arms trade

The trickster is notoriously two-faced – “the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox”. A “boundary-crosser”, the trickster adopts disguises as necessary to move between worlds¹. Yet, although devious, the trickster perhaps offers useful strategies to reveal corruption behind power. As in martial arts, where a blow is turned back on an aggressor, the trickster’s duplicity is perhaps only a mirror.

In this paper I explain how I have used trickster strategies in my art practice. I am a war artist. And while there are respectable traditions of war art, the heroic paintings of battles for instance, my work is influenced by a less respectable tradition – DADA. I use reversal, satire and masquerade to represent a shadowy aspect of war – the arms trade. DADA artists developed a range of trickster strategies in the First World War to parody European society, and reveal its links to war. With European economies still largely reliant on the arms industry, and engaged in unnecessary wars, these methods seem as relevant as ever. The paper starts with a brief introduction to the arms trade, and then suggests why conventional war art overlooks this aspect of war.

Finally, I discuss how I have used trickster strategies to draw inside arms fairs.

War in the twenty first century is big business. After a century of conflict, manufacturing in Europe and the USA has become skewed towards arms production. President Eisenhower warned in 1961 that this has created a military-industrial complex – a network of alliances between governments, the military and the arms industry exerting an undue influence on government policy. When military budgets fell at the end of the cold war there was a brief opportunity to redirect manufacturing to other purposes. Instead, arms companies expanded beyond state boundaries, merged into multinationals, and diversified into security. Solomon Hughes suggests that this influenced the idea of a ‘war on terror’². Conjuring up a vague but ever-present global threat, the phrase ‘war on terror’ has justified two wars, new forms of surveillance, and increases in spending on defence and security. However, while arms companies have benefited from the war on terror, they do not depend on it. As multinationals, they have few loyalties to any state and sell to almost any country willing to buy – to developing countries at inflated prices, to opposing sides of border disputes, and to repressive regimes

¹ Hyde (2008: 7).

² Hughes (2007).

for ‘crowd control’³. The stun grenades, tear gas and military vehicles used to suppress pro-democracy protests in Bahrain in 2011 were supplied by UK arms companies⁴.

Meanwhile war art looks the other way, focusing on the war zone as if war spontaneously ignited there. This is subtly enforced by official commissioning. In the UK, artists are regularly commissioned to draw and paint on location in war zones. There is one proviso – the art must be based on things artists have seen⁵. Official war art is frequently described as an eyewitness account of war. This is curious, and contradictory. It imbues the work with the objective truth of a court witness, while drastically reducing the subject matter. For reasons of safety, official artists are kept away from actual conflict. This was summed up by Steve McQueen, an official artist in the Iraq War,

“I knew I’d be embedded with the troops, but I didn’t imagine that meant I’d virtually have to stay in bed”⁶

With such restricted access, official war art inevitably gives a sanitised picture of war⁷. However, the problem is not simply that artists are unable to see the brutality of war. The emphasis on the war zone also rules out political, economic aspects of war at home. The work is then shown in prestigious galleries, attributing it with the status of high culture. So, official war art sanitises, and depoliticises war, and presents it as part of culture.

The idea that art represents the heights of culture is of course highly contested. The DADA artists, George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde argued that “so-called holy art” provided a civilised façade for war⁸. DADA satirised the idea of high culture by parodying its exhibitions, art and manners. Grosz had an academic fine art education, and learned to draw in the traditional way by copying old masters. Traditional drawing emphasises detached observation through perspective, delineation and shading. But, while these methods are useful for depicting visible surfaces, they are less able to convey invisible factors such as corruption, manipulation or oppression. So, Grosz developed an alternative drawing style by reversing academic methods. Instead of

copying old masters, he said he “copied folkloric drawings in urinals, because these seemed to me to be the most concise expression of strong feelings”⁹.

Using exaggerated expressions, harsh lines and animal metaphors, Grosz’s drawings evoke violence and greed in the apparently polite settings of dinner parties, cafes and bars. In addition to drawing the Weimar Republic Grosz parodied its dress, walking through Berlin as DADA Death, a combination of formal business dress and a skull mask. So, there are four methods here – reversal, satire, caricature and performance, intended to draw attention to the ideologies of apparently neutral genres, to convey unseen political aspects of a situation, and strip away a polite veneer.

DADA was my starting point, but I have also developed these methods. Performance has taken the form of a masquerade to get around the security systems of the war on terror. And I have combined caricature with observational drawing – to investigate locations, while satirising them. I have reversed official war art by mimicking its convention of drawing on location – but instead of drawing in war zones, I draw in arms fairs.

Arms fairs are vast trade shows where arms companies promote products to an international clientele. Two of the world’s largest – DSEi (the Defence Security Exhibition International, *ills. 1–4*) and Eurosatory (*ill. 5*) take place on alternate years in London and Paris. There is intense security around these events, provided by an alliance of police and private security guards. DSEi is held at ExCel, a concrete edifice disconnected from its surroundings by high wire fences, and railway lines. This isolation is deliberate – the building was designed to act as a fortress when necessary¹⁰. So initially, I drew on its outskirts, playing a cat and mouse game with police, being stopped, searched, threatened with arrest and moved on. That’s when I developed the idea of a masquerade. I found I could get inside DSEi and Eurosatory by applying for a pass as a ‘war artist’ under the pretext of sketching tanks for paintings.

The inside of arms fairs raised new challenges – how to convey the discordant experience of these events. Bombs, tanks, fighter jets and warships are all on show. There are also components – nuts and bolts, and as war is increasingly privatised, products for every aspect of life on the battlefield from hel-

³ Feinstein (2011).

⁴ Beaumont and Booth (2011).

⁵ Gough (1994).

⁶ Searle (2007).

⁷ Stallabrass (1992).

⁸ Grosz & Herzfelde (1992: 451).

⁹ Ades (2006: 308).

¹⁰ Minton (2009: 13).

III. 1.
Jill Gibbon, *Chemical protection suits*, DSEi (Defence Security and Equipment International exhibition), 2007



III. 2.
Jill Gibbon, *Missile*, DSEi (Defence Security and Equipment International exhibition), 2011



ments and guns, to camouflage. Yet, in sharp contrast to the military hardware, this is promoted using the glitziest tactics of advertising. Women in low cut blouses giving away 'show catalogues', sweets and gifts. Mannequins hang from the ceiling, guns are lined up like shooting games, and tables are laid with champagne. At Eurosatory, the arms manufacturer Rafael even hosted a fashion show with models parading haute couture dresses in front of missiles named 'Lethality' and 'Spike' to Handel's 'Queen of Sheba'.

At the opposite extreme from overt marketing, arms fairs are validated by discrete rituals of business. The ties, suits, polished shoes and handshakes create a façade of apparently homogenous values. It is a continual challenge – how to depict this with-

out reproducing the veneer. I draw on location in small sketchbooks. I don't draw individuals, but combinations of people as they pass. I start with observational methods, but when I see a crack in the façade, I emphasise it – manipulation, a desperate sales pitch, flirtation, depression, despair. I focus in particular on the mannequins that line the hall. Their impassive presence seems to sum up the increasing use of mercenaries in war. To convey the sexualising of weaponry at arms fairs, themes of prostitution also run through the drawings. Perhaps for this reason, my cover as an official war artist was short lived.

When a security guard noticed the way I was drawing at an arms fair in 2008, he asked me to leave. Since then, my applications to arms fairs as



Ill. 3.
Jill Gibbon, *Gun*, DSEi (Defence Security and Equipment International exhibition), 2011



Ill. 4.
Jill Gibbon, *Teargas*, DSEi (Defence Security and Equipment International exhibition), 2011

a war artist have been refused. However, I have continued to try to get in with a range of different masquerades. Marta Smolińska suggests that the trickster makes rules visible by breaking them: “through acting on the edge of the established order, he makes us aware of the definition underlying it”¹¹. By adopting different masquerades, I attempt to draw attention to the criteria for admission to arms fairs.

¹¹ Smolińska (2011: 4).

Admission to DSEi is particularly contradictory, caught between the conflicting aims at the heart of the arms trade – the need to sell as many weapons as possible, while appearing respectable. Restrictions extend beyond an understandable concern to prevent terrorist attacks, prohibiting anyone who might challenge the façade – protestors, and even those wearing unsuitable attire. A sign at the entrance warns that visitors must wear business or military dress. Yet, while protestors are handed over to police, DSEi admits almost anyone who wants to

Ill. 5.
Jill Gibbon, *Rep*, Eurosatory
(International Defence & Security industry trade show),
2008



buy or sell arms, so long as they are wearing a suit. So, admissions seem primarily determined by sales, and decorum.

In 2011 DSEi added a new feature to its veneer of respectability – a program of seminars mimicking an academic conference. The ‘conference’ ostensibly offered a venue to disseminate research in the field of war and security. But, with an emphasis on ‘industry collaboration’ the sub-text was that the research should generate new products and profits. This is symptomatic not only of the priorities of DSEi, but the increasing dependence of universities on corporate funding. I subscribe to a number of research mailing lists so, on the same day I was refused a pass as a war artist, I received an email as part of a mass mail-out inviting me to submit an abstract for the DSEi conference.

This seemed to offer a way in to DSEi by the back door. So, I constructed a sham abstract ‘Opportunities on the front line with war art’ proposing war art as an innovative form of promotion for the arms industry. I suggested that small companies could increase their profile in the war zone by sponsoring war artists, and detailed ‘networking opportunities’ such as exhibition openings where they could rub shoulders with arms dealers and government officials. I also suggested that art could help corporations with an image problem, proposing as a case study KBR’s sponsorship of war art in Iraq. Finally, I littered the abstract with acronyms from DSEi’s promotional material – SMEs (small and medium enterprises), OEM (original equipment manufacturer) and UOR (unusual occurrence report).

Two months later, I was a little horrified, when the abstract was accepted. Not only was I invited to give a presentation, but I was encouraged to collaborate in other ways. The conference organiser suggested,

“If we can look at any other ways of working together, to see some of your art displayed we would be delighted to explore options.”

Following the principle of the trickster, I agreed. And, she responded:

“Are you happy for me to put your story into a potential hook for our PR company?”

The word ‘hook’ made me feel a little sick. I was becoming involved in networking in the arms industry myself. But within twenty four hours the invitation was unceremoniously withdrawn. Perhaps my abstract had reached security, or the conference organiser had simply checked my ‘art’.

I found another route in to DSEi in 2011 in any case, mainly by wearing a pinstriped suit. One of the reasons it seems important to keeping going back, is that the sales strategies change. At previous arms fairs, the main sales pitch has been ‘the war on terror’. Since then military budgets have been cut across Europe and in the US, so anti-terrorism has become less profitable. However, following the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East and anti-austerity demonstrations in the West, there is a new target. This year’s big sellers were products for crowd control, euphemistically called ‘non-lethal weaponry’ – smoke grenades, water-cannons, tear gas, pepper spray, and Darth Vader-esque protective clothing for police using this arsenal. As in previous years, the cham-

pagne flowed, oblivious of the recession outside. There was also entertainment, this time a string quartet on the back of a military truck.

And it is for this reason, because the arms trade is duplicitous, changing enemies to maintain profits, making arms sales appear respectable with seminars, and glamorous with wine and music, that trickster strategies seem necessary – to get around security, satirize the manners, and draw attention to the façade.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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"Professional Bad Guys": the rebellious British and Polish art in the context of changes in the Nineties

The British Art Boom

In 1991 young and already recognizable artist Damien Hirst created his notorious artwork titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The art piece consists of a water glass filled with the formaldehyde, into which he immersed a 14-foot long tiger shark. Hirst created that piece during the conservative, post-Thatcher era in England when contemporary art was still on the outside position of the British government priorities. Yet it had been created right before the transition, when the visual culture was about to become an efficient tool in the hands of the new political party in power. Two years after the Hirst's case, Katarzyna Kozyra brought on the Polish artistic ground her degree piece *Piramida zwierząt* (Pyramid of animals, [ill. 1](#)). The sculpture was made of four stuffed animals: a horse, a dog, a cat and a rooster, put one onto another to create a pyramidal form and to become a finished art work. The sculpture was accompanied by the video documenting the process of skinning the horse.

Indeed, the juxtaposition of these two works might be explicable: they are using the same aesthetic language, they are involved in the ethical aspects of art, and both of them represent a new way of thinking about sculpture material. Moreover,

they became a media symbols that could properly visualize artistic changes arising from the socio-political shift in the decade of 90's (same in Britain as in Poland). However, while the comparable aesthetic of those works could probably be nothing more than an intriguing coincidence, the meaning of them both can be located in a similar context which in fact led to the creation of those works at that specific time in the art history.

The principal subject matter of the article is to concentrate on some of the artistic agencies of the Nineties in Britain and Poland, related with the so called opposing attitude toward general socio-political and artistic situation of that time. Furthermore, I would like to indicate and compare the specific atmosphere of that moment in British and Polish art circles, where the context of Great Britain would reveal my main interests as a researcher and the Polish plot can be seen as a natural background for the analysis.

The beginning of the 1990s in London was a period in the British history when the phenomenon of "Cool Britannia" was created. This occurrence grew out of the pop culture trends in art and was successfully used by Tony Blair in his political tactics as a tool to strengthen the social trust to the government. The leading goal of the Labour Party media promotion was to show that this political



Ill. 1. Katarzyna Kozyra, *Pyramide of Animals*, 1993, in the collection of Zachęta National Gallery of Art, photo: J. Gładkowski, courtesy of Zachęta National Gallery of Art

group was mainly concentrated on the intention to modernize the country, which for quite a long time has been plunged into recession. Intentionally, the main audience for that ingenious tactic were young people whose lifestyle hadn't had not drifted far away from ideas being popularized by revolutionary Londoners during the swinging and joyful era of the 1960s, and towards whom new slogans relating to "Cool Britannia" were directed.

The British artistic culture was not however always that attractive. After the Second World War, a greater euphoria to the public opinion was brought about by David Hockney, and it was not his oeuvre, that media loved about him, but because of his famous lame jacket, he wore flippantly across the town. This in fact sad story about drowsy British art world was – regarding to Gregor Muir – the American domination effect, the efficient monopolization since the 1950s of every cultural area from the New York City to the West of Europe. Abstract Expressionism, Minimal art, Pop art and Conceptual art – all of the new art forms, created and developed in the United States were transferred to the British ground, where they could play a role not simply as an inspiration, but mostly became an instant formula for the local artists who from then on worked in the shadow of American leg-

end¹. Nevertheless, the British tradition of avant-garde movements, which had a huge influence on the later British art, drifted in a slightly different stream, located on the boundary of the mainstream art and revolutionary acts that constantly endeavored to break social formulas and artistic canons. This striking tradition of being a rebel in a world of musty English rules was brought into existence right at the beginning of the 20th century along with the creation of the Bloomsbury Group – one of the most fascinating English art circle at that time. We can easily trace some analogues in the process of forming similar artistic groups, created in London afterwards. Members of the other artistic movements, instead of proclaiming new artistic manifestos, were living unconventional lifestyles just as Bloomsbury fellows did. Thereby their biographies are the aspects through which we can now understand their attitude toward art issues, social habits and cultural emancipation.

Informal art groups affiliated by the common art conception and specific idea of "living life as a creation" influenced the London's artistic milieu during the whole period from the early modernism to the postmodern era when the bad boys and girls known as the Young British Artists came out to the stage. Very bold and not less insolent provocateurs were hanging out in the streets of the Eastern London, making fun of the official art language, filling it with the street lingo and slang taken straight from the glam clubs and alternative pubs where the new artistic wave was being born. This new-born phenomenon based its uniqueness on the tradition of groups such as: Bloomsbury, Camden Town Group or London School on the one hand and surprisingly on the junk culture, urban art and pop culture on the other hand.

Declared schemers – as they were called by the media and public – tried to distance their art from the new form of snobbery, even though this quality became a usual form of describing their art, while the career of some of the YBAs hit the highest point (just before 2000). The turn of the 80s and 90s was for the YBAs the moment of blissful hedonism, joyful creativity, but also mocking and naughty freaks in front of reputable cultural institutions and wealthy collectors, who during that time in London were responsible for creating a spe-

¹ Muir (2009: 2–4).

cific stuffy atmosphere, where art was used as a tool to shape a so-called good taste.

The turning point in the evolution of art which later became the Britart symbol was the Freeze exhibition, organized in July 1988. The show took place in an abandoned space of London's Docklands, localized in the east part of the city (the place whose legend did not fit the discourse of the glorious history of London city). Along with the Freeze, new stage of an exhibition practice in the British art history began, where austere and often desolate spaces of former warehouses or offices became a specific background for art shows. Nevertheless, those fresh ideas of displaying art, significant for the YBAs circle, provoked also another facade of the critic, in which art shows were usually described as far from being ordinary. According to some art critics it was like experiencing a form of a nightmare rather than an aesthetic sublimity. As Matthew Collings wrote in his witty *Blimey! from Bohemia to Britpop, the London Artworld from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst*: "There's often no electricity so that if you arrive at all late you can't see anything. And the toilets are often not working or not installed at all. The spaces can be dangerous. Especially the docklands one where the doors are often not secured, with the opening leading simply into empty space, and there is a strong likelihood of someone walking out of a warehouse show to their death"².

However, those exhibitions – often sharing similar titles and same exhibition scheme (Freeze, Modern Medicine, Gambler) – became a legend around which the alternative London art scene was creating at that time. But it was alternative as long as it would not go under the hegemony of national/public institutions, and up to the moment when it became dependent on the influence of art collectors and important art patronages.

Around 1990, in the YBAs circle artistic personalities has started to shape. Their creative work would be later reflected in artistic statements of at least next two generations of art makers. Moreover, they brought out a new myth of an "artist-outsider" or an "artist-nipper" whose profession was to break stereotypes, provoke and make fun of the tradition, believing in good fun and the joy of life. The young rebels' art was a reaction to the social and politico-economic situation associated with

the 80s' recession, high unemployment rate and severely neglected city. But in their artistic practice we can find not only a critical voice for economical tiredness of Great Britain, it is also strongly recognized as a reflection of the condition of the British society still dreaming about the return of the aristocratic England. Their very personal and critical view was directed towards institutional hierarchy and the low status of fresh graduates of art schools, therefore they took the effort to prove (and Freeze was a helpful tool to do it) that the strength of art and artistic success was lying in the group solidarity.

Among these happy outsiders³, apart from already mentioned Damien Hirst, the key personalities were Sarah Lucas and Angus Fairhurst, Richard Patterson, Matt Collishaw, and later also Tracey Emin, Chris Ofili, Chapman brothers, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, Marc Quinn and Douglas Gordon. By inventing a broad circle of colleagues, Young British Artists were an artistic inspiration for themselves, which gave them a confidence to co-operate in provocative acts in art that surprisingly were an integral part of their daily life, as Sarah Lucas recalls: "...we were an ever expanding bunch of artists, and to a great extent we were our own audience. People were organizing one-off shows in warehouses and some were running small galleries off the beaten track, doing things in empty shops and so forth. Also managing to get beer sponsorship and generally having a party. The scene was very energetic and buoyant, and that takes a lot of people"⁴. But yet, the fact of living life as an art became a problematic aspect separating them from the rest of the British artistic milieu. Ostentatious exhibitionism in Tracey Emin's art, Sarah Lucas' scatological humor, irritant popularity of Damien Hirst, iconoclastic practices used by Chapman brothers or perversity in Chris Ofili's art – these are only few infamous components of Young British Art that skeptical critics hated.

But the shameless attitude of young Brits threatened the solid and long lasting historical and artistic doctrines. Reaching for untraditional new media and unconventional and trashy materials suggested

² Collings (1997: 74).

³ Happy outsiders – a term used in an exhibition title dedicated to the young art from London and Scotland, curated by Magdalena Kardasz: *Szczęśliwi outsiderzy z Londynu i Szkocji*, 25.05–14.07. 2002 Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 10.08–08.09 2002 BWA Contemporary Art Gallery, Katowice, Warsaw 2002.

⁴ Corwin (2011).

tiredness of the common rules of art, and became a new direction through which new creative forms were constituting. The art of the YBAs would incorporate postmodern metaphors and urban lyricism, affirmation of everyday life, carelessness, triviality and witty jokes. It was a kind of a clash where a camp aesthetic had been put together with an ambiguous form of an artwork and with its significant ideological contents, being a brief meditation on the contemporary world. This, in fact, risky (but well known in the world of art) tendency of staying outside of the general style and an attempt to take up alternative concepts of art, let the young British artists to be considered as a new British bohemia. As Iwona Blazwick wrote in her article *Fine Young Cannibals*: “work of the new avant-garde is a poignant, even pathological evocation of an everyday dystopia of urban angst and grass roots survival strategies”⁵.

A Presage of Changes

At the same time in Poland new socio-political circumstances began to emerge. The 1989 was a year of political, social and cultural transformations and it put art into the new system context. It needs to be mentioned, however, that according to Piotr Piotrowski it was 1980 and the emergence of “Solidarność” (Solidarity) that marked the significant shift for the Polish society. The artistic awareness that started to react to the common social stagnation was significant for the caesura of 1980s. In his book *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945* (Meanings of modernism. Towards a history of Polish art after 1945), Piotrowski writes: “In 1980 ZPAP (Association of Polish Artists and Designers) supported the workers protest in the coastal cities, as one of the first official institution. (...) This ethical and political uprising can be seen as a *pars pro toto* of the society, as a symbol of the changes occurring at that time in Poland where society seemed to stay passive and reconciled with its communistic fate”⁶. Nevertheless the main subject matter of Piotrowski’s study is the so called “third circuit” of artists who were opposing the communist regime, but on the other hand were keeping distance toward the art of the culture of opposition, related often with the

Catholic church, particularism and in some way the nationalistic ideology of “Solidarność”. Thus, the next generation of artists, for whom artistic activity would be a reaction to the reality of the following decade, would continue the tradition of the independent art of the 80s, but simultaneously would found their own autonomous artistic language, responding with the new context of the then time.

The complexity of circumstances in the Polish art of the 1990s was a result of two vivid (postwar) traditions: the one rooted in alternative movements and the other related to the shift toward Western artistic tendencies, noticeable since 1955. Analogically, in the British culture the decisive moment was the establishment of the centre-left government in 1997 or even earlier when Margaret Thatcher’s government fell in 1990. Yet, the liberal shift in Britain brought a servile duty of art which for then on had to play a particular role in Blair’s propaganda for accomplishing the idea of “Cool Britannia”. Hence, to describe the most explicit difference between Polish and British cultural changes I would point out the pop culture hegemony in Britain, that was used for identifying artistic phenomenon with the sphere of commercialism and mainstream, while in Poland it was a return toward a great, universalistic narration that determined the martyrdom side of art, especially the one involved in social and political problems.

Two phenomena concern me the most regarding the context of changes in 1990s. The first one is associated with the recuperation of a specific atmosphere of creation and excitement, created by the London and Warsaw artistic milieu, whose ambition was not to break the general authority system but rather to undertake an agency locally, on a small scale. The second one, strongly recognized throughout the decade of 90’s in Poland and Britain, which can be perceived as an act of a private revolt, is the female art. Women artists, especially during the moment of changes, applied in their artwork an individual language, distinctive for its poetry, and striking as it used vulgarity, aggression and ostensible egocentrism.

The already mentioned term “dystopia”, which Iwona Blazwick uses to describe the uniqueness of Young British Artists art might be a good example that distinguishes art practices of 90’s, both in Britain and in Poland. As said before, the key role in the British art production, had been played by aspects of consumerism and pop culture, which were of-

⁵ Blazwick (1997: 35).

⁶ Piotrowski (2011: 220–221).

ten undertook by young artists to reject the artistic state of affairs. Whereas in Poland, where the *raison d'être* of those concepts were in fact gradually constituted after 1989, artists initiated individual art issues, questioning the role of art and its maker or continued to undertake the aspects of its social meaning. However, one exception should be recalled. The Chapman brothers, who have collaborated since 1991, are well known for their seditious, iconoclastic visions. In 1993 they made a diorama sculpture entitled *Disasters of War* created out of plastic figures (ill. 2), whose arrangement was based on the famous Francisco Goya's etchings of the same title, made as a result of the artist's war experience. The Chapman's sculpture composed of mutilated, bent and fragmented plastic equivalent of victims' bodies, revokes a real horror of the Spanish War of Independence. Therefore, it can be perceived as a representation of a dystopia, a vision of a universal atrocity. Closely related to the *Disasters of War* is the work of a Polish artist Zbigniew Libera made in 1996 and entitled *Lego. Obóz koncentracyjny* (*Lego. The concentration camp*, ill. 3). The art piece consists of a set of seven boxes of Lego bricks. Each set of bricks, selected by artist from those available in a mass production, enables to build one's own concentration camp. The photos of camp models, visible on the boxes, are paradoxically recalling the popular images of those traumatic places that we know from books, newspapers, documentaries and feature films. In general, they recall images widely known from the pop culture. Similarly to Chapman's work, here we can notice skeletons of the victims or brutally treated bodies and their executioners. Both artworks received a negative acclaim due to the use an iconography of suffering in inappropriate and unfamiliar for art practices way. They are not the type of images that proclaim compassion, they are rather approaching debased values and – as Simon Baker observes – they correspond with the Georges Bataille's theory that "even the most terrifying painting is there to attract visitors"⁷. In the Polish art of the Nineties, Libera became one of the first to speak about the mass culture standards, and its influence on the condition of the contemporaneity, while being adopted in the everyday life. Accordingly, the plastic model of the concentration camp can be read as a human pathological adora-



Ill. 2. *Disasters of War*, Jake Chapman, Dinos Chapman, 1993, photo: ©Tate, London 2012



Ill. 3. Zbigniew Libera, *Lego. Concentration Camp*, 1996, box design, archive material, 28x27 cm, courtesy of Raster Gallery

tion of indecorous fantasies, commonly accepted in the pop culture wares.

The pop culture phenomenon, translated into the language of modern aesthetic can also exemplify the condition of some of the artistic community of the 90s either in London as in Warsaw. The group of Young British Artists used the trickster strategy to publicly make fun of reputable cultural institutions and of the British conservative tradition. Their intention was to destabilize the actual art hierarchy and furthermore to devaluate the phenomenon of its exclusivity. The pop cultural means such as banality, tendentiousness, sensation and the commercialization effect became a resultful tools in

⁷ Baker (2005).

their art activity. YBAs abandoned the commonly used, valuable artistic materials and reached out for those made out of everyday objects. Thus, the trashy aesthetic expressed their defiance toward the art sublimity extremely well. As an early practice of the YBA group, they were focusing not only on the organization of art shows but the whole socio-artistic life, which eventually led them to form a hermetic community of young artists and their befriended audience, where those who get the after party invitation at the opening could feel like a lucky beggar⁸. This group of young determined artists spread around an image of an easygoing artist spending his/her time on striking up a new lucrative friendships and attuned to what was going on internationally. A strong solidarity formed inside of this circle decided largely about its popularity. The group shows, organized in a small private galleries, run by their friends, usually included artworks made by the members of YBA, and the promotion of these events at the beginning of the Nineties exerted an influence rather locally. However, a moment later their artistic enterprise would result in an international art shows like "Brilliant!" held at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis, USA, between 1995 and 1996 or the same year Damien Hirst would have first solo exhibition *No Sense of Absolute Corruption* at the Gagosian Gallery in New York. Later, thanks to the Jay Jopling's and Charles Saatchi's commitment they would receive a international recognition and popularity. Therefore, the phenomenon of YBAs is based on the good publicity, acts of provocation and self-promotion on the one hand and simultaneously on keeping relations with fellow artists, which determined the buoyant type of art they made. Due to the fact that the members of YBAs were for themselves a constant inspiration, the emergence of a collaboration between artists was possible, like *The Shop* run for six months in 1992 by Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst – Angus Fairhurst cooperation during the Joshua Compston's *A Fête Worse Than Death* held in 1993 in Shoreditch where they founded a vibrant artistic scene. Dressed as clowns, both artists were selling spin paintings for £1. The atmosphere of an artistic revolt, manifested in a collective responsibility for the London's cultural life in the first years of the post-Thatcher era, evoked a greater impulse to carry through the cultural shift

then the political strategy of Tony Blair, founded on the "Cool Britannia" watchword that in fact was based on the peculiar authority and fame of Young British Artists.

Meanwhile, the Polish artistic values, possessed by the sense of a mission and the duty of carrying the universal meaning, strongly supported by the old generation of artists, were efficiently disturbed since 1995 by two art historians and co-publishers of the "Raster" magazine. Łukasz Gorczyca and Michał Kaczyński were the editors of the a non-professional and nonofficial zine, where they could provide reports from the cultural events of the capital city. The buoyant or rather mocking tone of the "Raster" magazine exerted on its caricatural form by which they were discrediting some of the mainstream artistic phenomenon. The specific language, pervaded with irony and witty puns, provided rebellious ideas to the field of Polish art scene. Accordingly, the playful quality of "Raster" resembles the character of young Brits, who pertly played with their native traditions. The politically incorrect sense of humor which Gorczyca and Kaczyński earnestly fight for, in order to restore the necessary balance in Polish culture after the tough period of communist oppression and censorship, became paradoxically a leitmotif of a new postmodern paradigm, with improper jokes and incongruous behavior that replaced a modernist reflection on the condition of a universal entity. But yet, in the mid-90s, the provocations initiated by the „Raster” circle constituted a platform for the authentic voice of young people whose revolutionary acts brought a fresh and bracing quality into the hierarchical artistic community. As they pointed out, the art developed at the turn of 80s and 90s in Poland was neither the art responding to their problems, nor one that they could identify with. It needs to be noticed that the Polish art of that time kept cultivating a safe, yet tedious for young generation, model of a nationalistic art within which artists would celebrate comprehensive qualities over an individuality and whose modern practices would rightly express the sense of a Polish identity. A similar problem seemed to arise in the British art of the period; an attempt to profess the universal truths, led some, even declared avant-garde artists such as Francis Bacon, Helen Chadwick or Michael Craig-Martin to the tendency of staying in a sphere of a so-called metanarratives.

⁸ Muir (2009: 75).

Local collectives, based in two capital cities, shared the roles of a new generation voice, turning into the personal, intimate problems rather than fighting for a better image of their nations. We should bear in mind however, that both phenomena emerged as rebellious, wrathful reactions to the political, social and economic circumstances, applying brand new means of expression whose origins should be sought in the pop cultural substance. Using the material of banality, scandal, and sensation, taken from media strategies, was as much an attribute of YBAs as of Polish "Raster". Moreover, when few years later Kaczyński and Gorczyca would promote the group of Polish painters from Kraków, known as the "Grupa Ładnie" (Pretty Group), the same mass culture strategies proved out to be a catchy method for diversifying and re-evaluating the traditional painting medium, which highly differed them from the values promoted by the Foksal Gallery – a mainstay of the Polish modern art tendencies.

What was the main ambition of members of both groups? Were their activities intended to be only temporary initiatives or was there a success put in their works in advance? In 2001 Paweł Leszkowicz wrote about the generation conflict, in which everyone are fighting for a power. He remarked that in the Polish culture there is a lack of creative, genuine dialog, replaced by the "authority of intolerance"⁹. Artistic activity of YBAs can be considered in a similar way, since their disgraceful and shocking practices might have just been an effective medium for gaining a fame and commercial success. What is more, in the case of YBAs, one can easily conclude that their members became a part of a pop culture machine that produces thoughtless celebrities.

But did the vision of a retrospective show, held in a renowned art institution and symbolizing the biggest artistic success, seem real while artists could not count on the state protectorate, either in post-communistic Poland as in post-Thatcher Britain? Or was the attempt to change an obsolete artistic language, that have been undertaken in a process of small steps and on a local scale more significant? Both YBAs and "Raster" have their origins rooted in the avant-garde tradition of contestation and independent art movements. They attained a cultural shift, inevitable in the Nineties in both

countries, yet the YBAs achievement has a global consequences, while Polish "Raster" can be dealt with rather locally. Furthermore, by transforming the authority system, they reevaluated the general art models which had hitherto been a cornerstone of both national cultures. As Anna Markowska wrote in her book *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* (Two turning points: Polish art after 1955 and 1989): "the heroic era of the mighty artist had collapsed. The city, the urban cultural palimpsest and the Haring's goofy cheerfulness were the dandies' natural environment. (...) The Raster's contribution was to bring the art out of the authority sphere and take it into the sphere of a private sovereignty"¹⁰.

A Different Context: Female Voices

The art of women in the Nineties – which Anna Markowska wrote about in the context of "Raster" – formed a kind of an unique, autonomic space. I am stressing here both the practices embedded in the feminist tradition that after 1989 in Poland started to be quickly absorbed by the new generation of artists, inspired by figures such as Natalia LL, and also a novel tendency to draw an inspiration from personal experiences. The icon of the second direction recalled here was the art of Louise Bourgeois, and Tracey Emin, its main representatives in Britain, while in Poland it was not until 2000 that this direction became undertaken by young women artists. Thus, this drift, characteristic for the British female art of the 90s, I would associate rather with the Polish art of the older generation, represented by Alina Szapocznikow, Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Ewa Kuryluk and already mentioned Natalia LL, along with the art produced by younger artists since 2000.

As noticed before, British artists of the Nineties were trying to reformulate academic standards into more popular language. That gave a peculiar chance to women artists, who up to then had struggled with the lower artistic status and secondly with the lack of identity with the national-academic qualities, established usually by male artists. However, this situation does not define the whole sphere of the female art, but refers rather to the deliberate activities, involved in a problem of inequality or dissimilarity of women art. Indeed, throughout modern art history, a number of female artists have

⁹ Leszkowicz (2001).

¹⁰ Markowska (2012: 316).

found their own way in the men-dominated artistic avant-garde movements, receiving critical acclaim frequently. Barbara Hepworth, Bridget Riley, later also YBAs member Rachel Whiteread, whose oeuvre was highly inspired by the modern thought, are among numerous female artists who gained success through their traditional forms of art. But yet, the aspect of feminist art should be analyzed using slightly different tools. In Britain, where the movement was established around 1970s, a huge role was played also by black, feminist artists, whose fighting willingness went much further, either to the field of inequality and the racial discrimination. The feminism of the Seventies would be in fact the movements of female fighters, whose determination and bravery determined the future potential for the next generation of artists active from the turn of the 80s and 90s. The art of Helen Chadwick, an artist and academic teacher at the Goldsmith College, during the years when some of the YBAs members studied there, represented the feministic shift in the British culture, yet it still reflected the artist's conceptual provenance. Despite the commonly shared agreement to associate Chadwick's art also with the intimate drift – since Paweł Leszkowicz, the author of her monograph specified her artworks as the “iconography of subjectivity” – it were artists of the YBAs generation who fully developed inspirations that private experiences, female eroticism and intimate sphere related with it gave them. The two female artists and their practices that are a significant point of reference in my examination of women artistic activity, Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas became prominent figures of YBAs and important ambassadors of the female art. Emin is interested in the autobiography while for Lucas the aspect of gender and sex identity deconstruction are the plots that intrigue her the most.

Along with the British development of the feminist art, before 1989 in Poland, female artists who stayed behind the iron curtain made similar artistic gestures, trying to recuperate their status both in the culture field as in the socio-political life. An eminent personas in the Polish feminism were Natalia LL and Ewa Partum, who explored their body to manifest its autonomy in the conditions of communist oppression. It seems that it was a natural consequence of these acts that the younger generation of artists would have been inspired by them and continued to expand the questions of the body's entanglement in the political and cul-

tural context. Katarzyna Kozyra, Alicja Żebrowska, Katarzyna Górna, Monika Zielińska vel Monika Mamzeta became leading feminists of the Polish art of the Nineties. However what I would like to reconsider here is the aspect of the female art originality and a kind of solidarity between women artists especially in the process of seeking out for the individual means of expressions. The unique quality of their art would essentially be based on the everyday language. Thus, the trickster strategy in the women art would in fact be defined by the aspect of the everyday. When in her article *Od tego nie uciekniesz.... O codzienności w sztuce Olgi Woźniak i Bogny Gniazdowskiej (rewizje)* [You won't run from this... About the Everyday in the Art of Olga Woźniak and Bogna Gniazdowska (revisions)] Ewa Toniak indicates that Polish art history had overlooked the art of female artists who debuted at the turn of 1989/1990, she gave us a reason to claim that this kind of intimate, commonplace art could not ever exist in the Polish culture shortly after the dismantling of communism. Nonetheless, the art of these two women listed in the title of the article was only two from many female voices that used the alphabet of triviality in their artistic agencies. The poetry of the everyday had been conveyed through the art of number of artists, whose oeuvres were examined usually by the art critics involved in feministic movement, while the broad media acclaim was attracted more by practices of the critical art of the same time.

Comparatively simple art of the mentioned artists, together with other women, active on the cultural field, such as – Julita Wójcik and her notorious gesture of peeling potatoes in the Zachęta Gallery (in 2001); Elżbieta Jabłońska who since 1999 was performing *Przez żołądek do serca* – (“The way to men's heart is through their stomach” or in word to word translation: “Through the stomach to the heart”) during which she prepared a dinner for the visitors of a gallery, or Jadwiga Sawicka and her artworks on canvases, walls and small objects that incorporate catchy watchwords and refer usually to the female identity hidden within them, e.g.: “Give me everything”, “I'm begging”, “The lost innocence”, “A slim bitch” – encourage viewer to compare those acts with the art of Emin and Lucas. First of all, their artistic statements are expressed through similar media like cooking or sewing, and in the case of using substance like painting, sculpture or installation, they create it out of everyday

objects that also become the main topic of work. Secondly, the importance of their art comes from the affirmation of the femininity, intimate, discredited by the contemporary culture. A crucial element of their art practices is also the specific sense of humor and self-irony, through which one can easily identify with the artists' private stories.

When Tracey Emin, in her installation *A Week from Hell* (1995) tells us a story about six days of her life spent with a toothache and unbearable headache, and sharing details about the psychology of her body and sexual daily routine with her partner – she contributes to the travesty of the commonplace through the artistic visualization of ordinary experiences and through elevating them to the value of art. This dramatic story Emin ends with the words: „Can't believe it was only a week ago – I went out and had a good time”.

A similar narrative approach we can observe in the project “You won't run from this...” made by Wolniak and Gniazdowska. The gallery arrangement, where the project was held, designed by artists, and divided into suitable rooms for domestic duties like cleaning, cooking, looking after a baby, reveal the need of sharing the daily routine experience with the audience. Evidently, the experience of everyday in the art of Polish artists have a different dimension than this experienced by young female Brits. Emin with her exhibitionistic attitude and moral imperative does not agree with the traditional role assigned to women. She does not tell us about her domestic duty, since her narration belongs rather to a woman, whose appreciation of her own independence is far too great for being someone's housemaid. Whereas in the Polish female art, either in Wolniak's/Gniazdowska's project as in Wójcik's peeling potatoes performance, occurs the tendency to ennoble the servant duties within the walls of the traditional artistic space – symbolized by the museum. The sublimation of the daily harshness that Polish artists obtain, seems to be a deliberate approbation of commonplace and domestic rituals in every women life. Therefore, in the Polish art history, an artist who makes her art out of the everyday, would be called a bustling women¹¹. But the bustle art does not question the accepted role of women and her everyday customs, as the self-ironic, intimate and uncompromising Emin's art does.

So who is the Trickster in the female art of the Nineties? In the Sarah Lucas' sculpture, titled *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), one can notice two eggs, located at the top of a wooden table, and a kebab roll underneath them. The meaning of this works refers directly to the problem of a female carnality. The mocking metaphor forces us to look at the composition as on the fragments of a woman body, to see woman breasts in the two fried eggs, and a vagina in the kebab roll. In this way Lucas reveals the hypocrisy of the a pop culture rhetoric, that affects the audience perception by offering a sweet, delightful obscenity covered with mawkish eroticism. Similar practices would subsequently determine the artist's engagement into the socio-political context. She would become a storyteller artist, whose narration refers to a tomboy with a fug in her mouth, interested in pornography, and enjoying scatological jokes. This tendency would be later visualized in the series of Lucas' self-portraits.

The role of Trickster, that in Lucas' art is played by her own, is conveyed through a jester cheerfulness or a carnival masquerade based in the everyday. It is not easy to find an intellectual equivalent of art made by Lucas or Emin in the Polish art of the same era. Since Polish female artists hide their exhibitionism under the servant pinny while their trickster potential comes out in the affirmation of the domestic commonplace brought on in the micro-narration – so different or even scandalous in comparison with the pathetic, modernistic universalism. But the genuine turning point, that cherished the joyful, free and brave art of Natalia LL or Alina Szapocznikow – just had to come a decade later, with the ideas of new generation of female artists like Agata Bogacka, Monika Wiechowska, Basia Bańda and others whose art would have simultaneously be inspired by the achievements of YBAs.

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¹¹ Kowalczyk, Ziarkiewicz (2003).

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Outdoor Activism

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Trickster on Polish streets

Graffiti as a form of expression, from the earliest times accompanied human communities, satisfying the needs of atavistic importance of the site and communications. According to Ryszard Kapuściński, it comes at a time of crisis, when a group wants to give its reasons, it is a kind of a “graphic scream.”¹ The upheavals of the political and cultural revolution in the twentieth century have left their marks on the walls of Warsaw, Paris, Belfast, Berlin, Prague and New York. But it was New York in the late 60’s and 70’s that became the birthplace of street art which transformed to the global graffiti counterculture movement. Changing the rules of art and contemporary artists’ anarchic actions proved to be a wonderful ground for street art and the street itself an ideal place for artistic expression for everyone who feels the need. Thanks to Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring this movement has become more than a mere marking of the living space and form of communication, slowly gaining depth of content, which was quickly appreciated by connoisseurs of art.²

Street art from the beginning, however, was a movement of the margin, by its nature considered illegal and detrimental to the order of capitalist cit-

ies and their sterility. This is why the street is an excellent environment activity for a trickster, a bully, a fraud who constantly mocks all the rules and balances on the edge of law. It is his permanent duty of asking awkward questions, forcing reflection, to a constant revision of attitudes, the constant ridicule of authority, social norms, but also himself. As described by Lewis Hyde, “trickster is the creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the crossdresser, the speaker of sacred profanities.”³ His actions can never be neutral, bland or banal. They need to move the audience, cause shock, provoke, destabilize, irritate, but also disarm with humor and a positive message. Because this figure is one of the most important archetypes that fulfills a vital function in society, tearing down and building anew, keeping the world in good order and harmony, it is therefore clear that not every street art creator deserves the honorable title of a trickster. The conflation of high and low art has led to the ennoblement of street art, and the temptation of fame and recognition of the many street artists deprived them of independence and diminished the power of influence. In no way does this situation threaten true trickster’s activity. Balancing on the border of the underground and mainstream is

¹ Gregorowicz (1991).

² Dymna, Rutkiewicz (2010: 358).

³ Hyde (1998: 6–7).

a dream situation for street fraud. They are in fact “the lords of in-between.”⁴

American graffiti is a kind of spontaneous artistic act, marking individuality of its creator. It is different from the European graffiti, manifesting rather *vox populi*. The former fits perfectly with the idea of Poetic Terrorism expressed by Hakim Bey: “Art as a crime. Crime as art”⁵, the latter supports ideas of liberation and emancipation inextricably bound to politics, which Bodó Balázs described so convincingly⁶. In Poland, the street art has appeared in the mid-80’s as an expression of opposition to the Communist dictatorship, derived primarily from the artistic and intellectual ground, so initially it was a marginal movement. Only after 1989, due to economic and political transformation of the country, the wave of fascination with the American style of graffiti arrived at the Polish streets and graffiti became a carbon copy of the global trend, executed by young people of the low income public housing, in fact hooligans, the so called “Blockers”, tied with hip-hop subculture, like by their peers from New York. Street activities were becoming more aggressive and the work of graffiti writers was described in terms of vandalism. The recent ten years, however, show a radical departure from the style of the 90’s. Analyzing publications such as the *Polish Street Art*⁷ or *Graffiti in Poland. 1940–2010*⁸, the return of street art to the artistic roots and becoming almost academic is noticeable. Street artists, abandoning illicit urban guerrilla dealings and moved under the wings of cultural institutions and with support of the city authorities, mass-produced large murals. British commentator Jonathan Jones (from “The Guardian”) states: “Street art is dying – and it’s our fault. [...] Nowadays, doing a bit of street art is as routine as checking our emails.”⁹ Objections against institutionalization and commercialization of street art can be heard on the occasion of every exhibition and festival of graffiti, but unfortunately rarely on the native scene, where authorized street art meets an uncritical admiration. Polish street during the struggle against Communism was a challenge for tricksters. Probably it could be continued. In this paper I will try to bring the most interesting sub-

versive actions made by street’s swindlers and track changes in their strategies since the 80’s to this day.

As street art arrived on Polish streets, on the walls of cities it waged an intensive communication war with public authorities. Slogans “Down with Communism” and “Solidarity fights,” were regularly painted over by officers specially appointed to take care of cleaning the city off inadequate slogans. The first stencils appeared in the early 80’s and were painted with color from the can. Their authors were mostly students involved in activities against the state or young artists. Stencils in that time have been largely associated with the punk subculture and anarchist organizations such as the Alternative Society Movement. Expression of these groups were even much pungent than “Solidarity” slogans and their stencils operated with ironic, intelligent humor, leading more sophisticated game with the audience. However, the struggle with the government, strongly supported by the Catholic Church, took place in an atmosphere of seriousness. Imposition of Martial Law in 1981, the repression and constant surveillance against Solidarity activists united society, but it was hardly conducive to subversive activities.

The situation changed somewhat with the appearance of the Orange Alternative, cultural and political movement founded by Waldemar Fydrych (a student of the University) in Wrocław in 1981. Radical strategy with the aid of surrealistic happenings and dada tricks was to ridicule permanent power, but sometimes also the opposition. The first activity carried out in urban space was to paint dwarfs on the walls. Thus, dwarfs became the emblem of the group (ill. 1). Dialectical conception of painting, formulated by Fydrych and inspired by the dialectics of Hegel and Marks, stated that the writing on the wall can be a thesis, the stain on painted out caption – antithesis (the caption is literary, stain is abstract), and the synthesis is a dwarf, painted on the stain, because dwarf combines and exceeds the two previous marks.¹⁰ With the announcement of the Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism, The Orange Alternative (OA) began a series of absurd happenings and populated the streets of Wrocław with dwarves (ill. 2). Members of OA sang Stalinist Hymns under the chimpanzee cage at the zoo, on the occasion of The Policeman Day they handed out flowers to officers. When the

⁴ Hyde (1998: 6–7).

⁵ Bey (2003: 8).

⁶ Pietkiewicz (2011: 6).

⁷ Dymna, Rutkiewicz (2010).

⁸ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011).

⁹ Jones (2011).

¹⁰ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011: 65).

dwarves have lined up to identification showing their ID or reported themselves to the police station asking for the arrest, authority of the government weakened. “After the first, second, fifth arrest, you gained the experience and knowledge, you got used to violence. Then the police (Citizens’ Militia) started to have problems. Even a policeman must have seen the sense of his work done. As demonstrator runs away, a policemen chases him, and when a demonstrator does not run away, and gives the policeman a flower, what should he do? This led to demoralization in the ranks of the police.”¹¹

In 1985–1986, Orange Alternative painted on the walls the word SEX, where “S” was the anchor, or “S” as the dollar with an anchor and a flag¹², which directly related to the Solidarity logo and outraged its activists. “Mainstream underground language with its spells and dogma was scoffed as OA dismantled the traditional neo-Romantic codes, questioning the role of an elite high culture on the march towards freedom.”¹³ The dada freedom in exposing the absurdities of contemporary reality, was however attractive to the large part of society, and in the larger students’ centers new fractions of OA movement were formed. Gnomes did not proclaim any specific manifestos and were not involved ideologically, but travesty of both Communist and Solidarity slogans aroused irritation of both sides of the conflict. A large dose of humor, which the group brought to the streets, enabled people a distanced look at the gloomy times. Damaging and discrediting the good reputation of authorities in the eyes of the public remain an invaluable merit of Wrocław dwarves. Dwarves did not ceased their tricky games after 1989 when Poland regained independence. The OA group changed a little its profile, but still remained active, and Fydrych, called the Major aka The Commander of the Fortress Wrocław became a legendary figure. Then another trickster Aleksander (Olo) Rostocki, member of the Orange Alternative from Warsaw, carried out an action sabotaging his own group and particularly the exceptional position of Major Fydrych who was even a candidate in presidential election of 1989. Rostocki’s goal became the wall in Wrocław’s Ostrow Tumski, near the cathedral, which was a place of free but non-political expres-



III. 1. A dwarf, Wrocław, courtesy of the Archives of the Orange Alternative



III. 2. Happening of the Orange Alternative in 1988, Wrocław, photo: NAF Dementi

sion and Major’s pride. All pictures on that wall were just joyful and colorful, a merry certificate of the Orange Alternative activity. According to Rostocki, the lack of interference in this space was against the idea of graffiti, which by nature depends on constant changes. Olo and his colleagues bought the paint and covered 12 meters of the gray wall with colored paint at night. This resulted in confusion among Wrocław dwarves and Security

¹¹ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011:72).

¹² Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011:65).

¹³ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011:50).

Service was suspected of the provocation. Rostocki commented: "Orange Alternative was very proud that there is the wall Wrocław, a local place of expression, where one does not paint over anything. Well, why anything were painted over there? This means that the wall is licensed in some way, consciously or not. Orange Alternative movement was inherently frivolous, it was not even a very serious contestation of the system, perhaps even the contestation of any seriousness".¹⁴

Galeria Działañ Maniakalnych [Gallery of Manic Actions]¹⁵ which was founded as a fraction of the Major Fydrych's Orange Alternative in Łódź, continued its strategy, but the extent of destruction was much greater. To imitate the communist system, Egon Fietke, the leader of the group, used his own weapons – social realism style slogans. It resulted in provocative stencils such as "Imprison Political", "1917: Communism, Hope of the World" or "Bicycle + Pollution = Revolution". Gallery of Manic Actions particularly liked to injure the credit and reputation of the Catholic Church. Slogans such as "Down with the communion" (instead of "Down with Communism"), "Liberty, equality, fraternity, copulation," "Reveal the primate's sex life," "Piss colorfully", introduced dissonance on Polish streets because it appeared that the separation between "us" vs. "them" is not so clear, and the words "we", indicating the unanimity of the nation, proved to be formulated too hasty. Gallery's message not only ridiculed Communist authorities and revealed their not always sincere intentions, but also showed that the opponents of Communism did not have to be necessarily supporters of the Catholic Church. The slightly vulgar, but harmless jokes on the walls of the Gallery of Manic Actions predicted a split in the Polish society, which occurred much later. The Leeeżec Community, continuing the Gallery's of Manic Actions ideas held the first action with stickers in 1990 during the presidential election. For posters, in which Lech Wałęsa posed with a big badge with Our Lady in the lapel of his suit, the group members stickers "Leeeżec Community is warning!" attached on the other lapel¹⁶. The street work of Egon Fietke evolved into big stencils, dominated by animal figures. And the Leeeżec Community did not give up their subversive activities.

When Construction in Process Festival was held in Łódź, the group glued posters all over the city with captions "Gentlemen, let's face it, what you do is shit, not avant-garde." Also, the first official exhibition in art gallery, under the title *Kaszana* (blood sausage) was a joke on the condition of contemporary art.

The period of political and economic transformation was also a time of radical cultural change, which affected the development of the Polish street art. There was some kind of Americanization of Polish society which for a half of a century was cut off from free contact with Western culture. The 90s on Polish streets, known as the second wave street art, were dominated by American influences. Availability of spray paint has changed radically the city's image. As the street art was born of tagging – different labeling, signing, marking, this form of expression became the most common among the new generation of street artists who were willing to follow New York roots. They began to paint railway carriages in the fashionable New York wild style. At the same time the content of these drawings became far more narrow and shallow compared with the period before the transformation; also, great vulgarization arose. The walls of buildings, including historic buildings, covered unceasingly and mindlessly with signatures showed that young people were obsessed with *horror vacui*. When in the U.S. similar forms of expression were regularly absorbed by the main circuit of culture, graffiti in Poland was still a big cultural shock. However, street artists, watching closely the events in the West, knew perfectly well that what they were doing was considered art. Aleksander Pietkiewicz calls this situation ironic – "artistic elite is giving an artistic asylum to teenagers with an infantile attitudes".¹⁷ Artists of that time were lacking a sophisticated intellectuality and their writings and images did not encourage any dialogue with pedestrians. The second wave proved to be very monotonous intervention in urban space. Street artists were far from formulating any artistic urban opposition and artistic provocation was replaced by mere vandalism.

Despite this opinion, KRAC, a representative of street bombing, the most devastating type of this movement, should be mentioned. The noteworthy character of his writings – an intensive tagging – has become almost legendary in Warsaw.

¹⁴ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011:109).

¹⁵ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011: 80).

¹⁶ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011: 83).

¹⁷ Pietkiewicz (2003: 12).

The owner of the Warsaw building where KRAC painted giant signature, offered the money price for capturing vandal. He also established a special website, documenting his exploits, in case you managed to catch him. In an essay on KRAC Marcin Rutkiewicz wonders whether KRAC is a painter. According to Rutkiewicz, if we defend the right of artists to ask questions about the meaning of faith, when they are throwing a crucifix in a jar of urine, there also should be a place for “mad painters, active in spite of everything and everyone, overwhelmed by creative passion that nothing can stop, who put at stake their health and life, if only just to be able to do what they do. They are part of our culture, just as easel painters.”¹⁸ Therefore KRAC deserves to be called a trickster for his stubbornness and elusiveness, but certainly for most of society’s his actions are an act of mindless vandalism, devoid of purpose. However, an overriding issue in the street bombing is the need for communication within the subculture and we can not ignore this need. It is also worth considering where does the aversion to dirty painted walls come from, because as history shows such walls always were part of the urban tissue. I think that our negative perception of street art is strongly affected by the ideology of modernism, with its white and sterile architecture of cities. This specific and historically created pure image of the city, despite the postmodern loosening of norms continues to be deeply encoded in the collective consciousness and all that disturbs such a ritual cleanness is seen as a detriment to the urban community. But do we really want to keep our clean home environment to resemble a sterile, impersonal spaces similar to those from the pictures of Giorgio de Chirico? Isn’t severity and unification of urban design like totalitarian architecture; are they not justified common associations with a police state where citizens – in a rigid and repressive space – are all day under surveillance? The city is a complex organism, its formation is the civilizing process not created by a gesture of an architect, but by the whole community. It seems obvious that when we built the city, we create ourselves. Also destroying it means destroying ourselves.¹⁹ It is worth to have this in mind, both for KRAC and his opponents. The question arises, who owns public space in Poland and what is its nature? To answer the

question, land ownership should be disputed – an issue not so obvious in post-Communist country. Paulina Olszewska accurately describes peculiarity of the situation summarizing ART BOOM Festival on the internet website Obieg: [...] it is easier to define what the public space in Poland is not than what it is. It’s not common, not available and undemocratic.”²⁰

Urban areas in Poland have undergone deep changes in the past two decades. In the visual sphere they can be defined as deepening chaos. A phenomenon of street artists of the third wave waging war against this chaos arouse although they often cut off from the street bombing. Their work is characterized by high artistic awareness, skillfulness and dexterity which is not surprising, since many of them are graduates of art schools. Thoughtful composition and not accidental colors, taking into account the context of the place, make attempts to embellish the city often end in success. Art institution have been recently interested in street art, exploiting the potential of street artists, to their great joy. In addition to interesting examples of intimate street art, the most common form of expression have become a large mural, which for professional painters seem to be an excellent alternative to less spectacular easel painting as medium in decline, and for cultural institutions, a distinct opportunity for advertising. Legalization of street art promoted by the cultural units and the City is largely a form of “appeasing” the rebellious movement. Controlling the work of street thugs is receiving full power over their work. Although the ennoblement of street art is a natural phenomenon, according to Edward Dwurnik it is caused by jealousy of recognized artists and their dream about naughty art, art of children, expressing an attitude of rebellion. Dwurnik claims it would be sad if street art were executed by professionals.²¹ Unfortunately, the artist’s statement proved to be prophetic. An official entrance of Polish street art to the mainstream was granted with giving 1st Prize to Sławomir Czajkowski (Zbiok) for an installation *All the drugs in this world won’t save us from ourselves* at the 9th Eugeniusz Geppert Painting Competition in 2009. The installation was not a successful attempt of transplanting street art to a closed gallery space. Zbiok’s artistic attitude is the best fulfillment of Dwurnik’s prediction. Even

¹⁸ Dymna, Rutkiewicz (2010: 99).

¹⁹ Krier (2001: 207).

²⁰ Olszewska (2009).

²¹ Gregorowicz (1991).

during the Geppert Competition, curators advertised Zbiok as an anarchist, who “does not value all authority, subverts its meaning and deprives of significance”²². But soon after, Zbiok, being a curator himself (he was in charge of two editions of *Out of Stb. External Artist Festival* in Wrocław), rapidly dissociated from hooligans work of street art. Explaining the concept of the exhibition he points out that the name “External artists” is meant “to avoid throwing amateur artistic activities – that unreasonably is called art – to one bag with mature creative attitudes represented by the invited artists.”²³ The official Polish street artists community willingly find themselves either as heirs of Keith Haring²⁴ or as successors of the avant-garde, although one can hardly assign any of the features to the historical avant-garde. Czajkowski, who became the guru of Wrocław street artists, guards his territory in a very pretentious way. Wrocław’s rapper and performer L.U.C. was accused by him of the appropriation of urban space. L.U.C. hired a team of graphic designers, that on several walls in the city created the illustrations for his CD in the form of murals. Sławomir Czajkowski really did not like it and pronounced his opinion about the disc in very harsh words to the musician via social networking sites: “<Regime shit> that the real art has nothing <fucking common> with” and “We the artists and curators made in Wrocław a true mural route, which forces you to think, and not to buy the CD disc. [...] People who have painted it, get money, they have to live on. My appeal is addressed to the jerk who wants to commandeer and conquer the Wrocław underground scene which have been building for years. Wrocław art community does not want you to paint the walls for promotion of your commercial product”²⁵ (another CD promotion on the walls happened in Warsaw, supporting the hip-hop duo Sokół & Pono). But Czajkowski himself is the author of an advertising spots for the TVN channel, which exploits the street art for commercials.²⁶ Did a bored trickster’s spirit decide to start the war in Wrocław? War of the wall, about ideas, about the property. It is hoped that the conflict will result in interesting substantive discussion about public space and the condition of Polish street art, but in a more well-

mannered way. Artists with the support of cultural institutions and the media are struggling to convince the public that street art is a “true” art. Although the Polish art market showed interest in the work of street artists and their works are available on auctions at reputable auction houses, their life is sometimes very short, as it was with a picture of The Krasnals collective, which was thrown away to the dust bin in the city center.²⁷ Street art without rudeness, rebelliousness and provocation, becomes a purely aesthetic statement. The artists who want to maintain their independence and nurturing the artistic ideas of guerrilla street art turn to the new “post-vandalism” movement.

The challenge of fighting the commercialization of street art is a great field for the activities of trickster. In the mid-90s, advertising agencies appropriated the aesthetics of graffiti to serve their corporate clients; thus the so-called guerilla marketing was born. A soft-drink “Frugo” was the first brand product on the Polish market that used graffiti. In 2002, the promotional campaign of Mountain Dew carbonated soft drinks took place on a nationwide scale²⁸, with a contribution of Warsaw graffiti-artists. The campaign carried out in two – legal and illegal – modes, introduced one thousand MDcrew labeled stencils on the walls of the city which suggested the support of the graffiti-writers and also gave the impression of mass nature of the phenomenon. Most writers boycotted the campaign, and its authors – traitors to the ideals were mocked with offensive signatures placed on advert’s stencils. However, the demand for this type of campaigns has increased, because they brought quick results and generated much higher profits in comparison with conventional marketing strategies. Aggressive marketing caused social discontent, provoking a debate about the ethics of guerrilla advertising. But much more effective was the active participation of the irritated population who sued commercial interventions using semiological guerrilla war strategies against the insistent advertising strategies. A trickster attacked The Polkomtel SA Company in Łódź which affixed cartoon stickers all over the city, promoting the brand “36.6”. Very soon the organization The Group of Certain People²⁹ was set up, which by using the ideas of adusting or-

²² Sikora, Stasiowski (2009:22).

²³ Czajkowski, Stembalska:(2008: 10).

²⁴ Czajkowski, Stembalska:(2008 :12).

²⁵ Badula (2011).

²⁶ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011: 241).

²⁷ Gazeta (2011).

²⁸ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011: 237).

²⁹ Info Reklama (2008).

ganized boycott of goods, leading to his defeat on the market. The stickers collected during clean-up of the city's by The Group of Certain People were arranged in a form of the word "SLUTS" in front of the company headquarters. This event revealed a consoling truth that the public is not indifferent to the common space, is willing to take care for it, undertaking radical action. According to Umberto Eco, while the ambiguity is excluded from everyday communication and is intended in aesthetic one, in mass communication, although it is ignored, it is always present. According to Eco, in these circumstances the semiotic guerrilla groups may contribute to the introduction of a critical dimension to passive reception.³⁰ Atom is a guerrilla of that kind because he intervenes in urban billboards' advertising content of such institutions as banks by adding "and fuck you" (as in: "Alior bank. The higher culture of banking" a phrase "and fuck you" was inserted). He also intervenes to ads of popular television soap-operas "39 and a half and fuck you" (original title *39 and a Half*) or election campaigns: "Donald Tusk. And fuck the rules." Despite some kind of vulgarity, the author is questioning authority, and in a somewhat primitive way, deconstructs the advertising content. 2DSH street artist from Wrocław makes it a little softer by appending stripes on billboards with a caption "TV warns it might not be true."³¹ A different form of opposition is proposed by Jerzy Kosalka, making his actions free from any kind of ideology and purpose. "He seems to expect an absurd from the world and that is making him amazed, so in his art he is affirming nonsense."³² Kosalka developed a brand "Cosalka", which is a combination of well-known brand and logo with the name of the artist. The artist suggested menthol and a kosher version of his brand name, and even the neon logo Cosalka emerged in urban space.

Radically different strategy was adopted by female tricksters, basing on a yarn and knitting. Urban knitting, being a female response to male-dominated graffiti, is now a global movement and its traces can also be found on the streets of Polish cities. Crazy and tricky handmade crocheted dress cover fragments of urban reality. Colored garments are given to parking meters, street signs, trees, bicy-

cles, monuments, and even buses. These actions are a kind of "emballage" (to use a name of procedure coined by Tadeusz Kantor), wrapping, enfolding. What is internal, associated with the home, security and warmth, is taken outside, helping artists to make the urban space domesticated, familiarized and embellished. Urban knitting introduces color into the urban culture, but also can effectively deconstruct it and undermine imposed hierarchies. Monuments of national heroes enjoy vivid interest. Magda Sayeg got dressed a monumental statue of soldier's gun located in Bali in colorful clothes. Jessie Hemmons made pink sweater for a bronze statue of a boxer Rocky Balboa in Philadelphia, and in a Christmas night, the Wall Street's bull was dressed by a Polish artist living in New York.³³ Defined sexuality of macho symbols have been veiled and cancelled. In Warsaw, yarn bombing is performed by Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, who prefers small forms, not always immediately visible in the macro-scale. "When I look at the city from the perspective of crochet and the coil of yarn it is always a little more me, more cozy and intimate"³⁴ – she said. However anonymous, a she-trickster decided to beautify the city's symbol – the Mermaid statue, located in Warsaw's Old Town. Mermaid received a blue bag with a Superman shield³⁵ (ill. 3). Filmed action of Mermaid's clothing was placed on the Internet, although its author is threatening a fine. Polish urban knitting seems to put on the first place a struggle for deconstruction of female symbols. It is therefore an interesting response to the global feminism attempt to abolish the dominance of macho cultures. Mermaid action is probably also a reference to Elżbieta Jabłońska's work "Supermenka" (superwoman) in which she becomes the hero of everyday life. Supporters of the yarn opposition complaint about backwardness bureaucracy of municipal authorities and their lack of understanding for this type of art, and these authorities ensure in turn, that they are in favor of improving the city's appearance but not without their permission. Simultaneous expression of both parties approaches the absurd. If allowed, dressing up statues and parts of urban reality would become quickly boring and commonplace activity. Thrill of fear and danger of arrest accompanying "criminals crewel" add more

³⁰ Eco (1996: 167).

³¹ Dymna, Rutkiewicz (2010: 63).

³² Kropiowski (2011).

³³ Karlin (2011).

³⁴ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011: 244).

³⁵ Eljaszak (2011).



Ill. 3. Warsaw Mermaid's Statue (Warsaw's Coat of Arms) with "Superman's" shield, photo: courtesy of the Archives of The Municipal Police, Warsaw

spice to the whole game and riotous tricksters in other countries does not complain. Balancing on the edge of the law is the essential element of trickster's pastime and his pride.

Another she-trickster nicknamed Nespoon produces unusual forms of ceramic stickers.³⁶ In the nooks of the city, she puts ceramics forms with traditional Polish lace motifs, which always perfectly match to the selected space. Her work is characterized by an unusual aesthetics and originality. More spectacular feats are not in short supply. In the Saxon Garden in Warsaw, Nespoon faced a group of 21 Baroque statues – patrons of various sciences and arts, except from one sculpture which surprisingly does not correspond to any concept or notion. She decided to change it. The stone figure received a ceramics cut-out and the caption "STREET ART" on the plinth and for a short time the statue became a "patron" of street artists (ill. 4). Nespoon is a polite trickster, as she says of herself, very willing to change the world, to make it a little bit better and more beautiful, and therefore encourages the segregation of garbage and adorns the city with her ceramics.

Also sophisticated is a trickster called "Truth" from Wrocław, famous of his city's "bracket fungi". Theoreticians often describe works of Truth in terms of land art because they always precisely match to the given space. Especially worth of attention is an installation prepared in 2008 for the Wrocław's Festival of Art in 2008. Next to the city's ditch Truth scattered about big, white beams of

polyester. They resembled giant matches thrown away from a matchbox (ill. 5). A scale of this action was a kind of a big surprise for participants of festival. Ewa Łączyńska – Widz says that originality of this kind of work is completely unusual in Polish art. Truth's installation is often compared to Christo, who wrapped many municipal monuments.³⁷

The changes taking place in a society exerted strong influence on the formation of Polish street art over the last three decades. Liberation from the Communist system, a capitalist economy created on its ruins, the trivialization of culture which remain obvious after the dismantling of the Iron Curtain left their mark on the city walls. According to Dariusz Paczkowski, "one of the worst things a breakthrough of late 80s brought was putting the emphasis rather on "I" than on "we". Cooperation ended, common goals run out, each paddles one's own canoe".³⁸ Equally important seems to be a generations shift – the older anarchist generation has been supplanted by the subculture of hip hop. Street art's life in nature is very short, its works are ephemeral, but artists' appetite for more and more fame was bigger and bigger. The creators focus on self-promotion, begin to document their activities, leading websites fighting for a new audience. The works of ancient art were focused on a long-term effect, an extension of the artist's life was according to the Horace's brag *Exegi monumentum aere perennius* (I have raised a monument more permanent than bronze). According to Andrzej Książek, "(...) in the industrial-consumptionist society all changes are happening very quickly, immediately, in a style matching a mechanical production. Artists of non-art matched their "works" to such a rhythm of life. Their products are constructed in such a way that will allow certain consumers to perceive them in certain time. The time of such works is against the idea of the old artwork's time."³⁹ The mainstream street art overcome the nature of non-art, but its price is to transform "Salon's" street artists into "well-mannered" buddies. "Images far too ordinary to be exhibited in art galleries are admired because they are on the street."⁴⁰

The period of the guerrilla struggle against Communism was full of subversive tricksters ac-

³⁶ Dymna, Rutkiewicz (2010: 176).

³⁷ Dymna, Rutkiewicz (2010: 299).

³⁸ Sikorski, Rutkiewicz (2011: 79).

³⁹ Książek (2003: 92).

⁴⁰ Jones (2011).



III. 4.
NeSpoon, *Muse of the
Street Art*



III. 5.
Truth, Installation prepared
for the Wrocław's Festival
of Art in 2008, photo: Edyta
Jezierska

tivities and their creativity stimulated opposition against the oppressive system. Subsequent stages of “vandalizing street” art and “mainstream street” art were phases of varied street activity. It may seem that fundamental changes in the Polish society will allow trickster activity to bloom but it turned out that the dynamic development of street art occurred later on. Street partisans needed a break time to acquire appropriate distance for the current events and arm themselves with appropriate tools to fight. Propensity to hooliganism can be observed only in recent years and it is currently women who lead here. Female tricksters bring freshness and a much more subtle form of expression, which is

the perfect counterweight to hooligan street art of the past two decades.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Political pranksters, provocateurs and Pan-ic: re-connecting countercultural practices

Preamble: tricksterism, bricolagekitchen and *Pan-ic*

So, *Pan-demonium* goes on. In all its forms and guises. Pan proliferates surreptitiously, flitting and twittering across the web, playing quietly in the streets, spreading temporary networks and transitory communities, sowing panic and the disruptive seeds of creativity and disorder across the globe. Great Pan is dead! Long Live Pan!

In July 2009, as bricolagekitchen, I put out a call on the internet to individuals or collaborators, to participate in a temporary community of *in-disciplinary practice* by creating visual, sonic and written responses to the idea of "*Pan-demonium*". The original statement for the project was:

Pan-demonium resonates with the current global political, ecological and economic situation – one in which the hegemonic forces of order have been overwhelmed by a dynamic of chaos and disorder, turning the world 'upside-down'. But what are the affective possibilities of disorder and noise? Does *Pan-demonium* offer a metaphor for a critique of global capitalism and its 'devils' – its *pan-demons* – in all their guises (pan-demics included)? What does *Pan-demonium* mean to you?

I presented a selection of the proliferation of responses – sound, text, video and images by

over fifty international artists – at AC Institute, a non-profit art and research space in New York in September 2009. Since curating that initial *Pan-demonium* exhibition, the project has developed to include a collaborative multimedia *Pan-demonic* performance at *The Knot*, at Tempelhof, Berlin in May 2010 and an 'indisciplinary artistic intervention' and exhibition in the city of Sheffield UK in November 2011 as part of *Pandemic*, a series of art practices and temporary urban interventions inspired by the Situationists. Other manifestations of *Pan-demonium* are germinating.

There is no doubt though that recent history has witnessed an excess of *Pan-demonium*. In an uncanny confluence of global economic and 'natural' catastrophes – financial crashes, debt mountains, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, nuclear disasters and oil spillages – the rhetoric of *toxicity* and *contagion* abound. *Demons* are abroad. *Pan-ic* reigns. Capitalism is not only in permanent crisis, but it is showing signs of – as John Holloway might say – "cracking". In the last year, the "cracks" have widened. The European debt crisis and resistance in Greece, popular uprisings, the 'Arab Spring', *los indignados* and a host of occupations, have disrupted the neo-liberal re-ordering of things. In the UK, organisations like *UKUncut* and *Occupy* groups have carried out audacious acts of flagrant civil disobedience, taking

over shops and setting up nurseries and temporary schools in banks, and hundreds of thousands of workers have joined students in a declaration that 'there is an alternative'.

And so, as the reiterated slogan of the ongoing *Pan*-demonium project indicates, pandemonium *does* go on. Are we witnessing a resurgence of an active revolutionary imagination? Is *Pan* on the streets, sowing the seeds of disruption, breaking through the fissures, seeping through the "cracks", a Dionysian spore spreading mischief? Where will the *Pan* virus appear next?

Introduction

Forms of creative dissent and carnivalesque resistance have colonised public space. A post-Marxist post-Seattle generation of activists, deploying strategies of anarchic festivity, have brought 'fun' into politics and a pandemic of silliness, pranks and tricksterism is currently abroad. Other authors in this volume have extensively reviewed and redefined historical and contemporary understandings of 'tricksterism' – from Jungian archetypes and native mythologies to malicious villainy. As they indicate, the trickster can be characterised as a shape-shifter, a clown, a jokester, a prankster, carrying out piratic rogueish behaviour, subversive silliness, interdisciplinary unruliness, causing mayhem. Jean Fisher argues that the subversive guise of the trickster is a playful figure who "refuses inertia" and "disseminates confusion". For me, in its subversion and disruption of the status quo, tricksterism goes beyond mischievous making-merry: disobedience, no matter how much it is deemed to be 'silly', has radical political implications. Underlining the etymological roots and multi-layered meanings of the word, the trickster spreads a kind of *panic* which, potentially, in its upsetting of the status quo, has political resonance.

In my brief exploration of a selection of artistic acts of tricksterism which provoke *pan*-ic, I want to make some countercultural connections between some pranksters of the Sixties and Seventies and contemporary strategies of creative dissent. From the pantheon of tricksterism, I introduce three figures: Robert Jasper Grootveld, Lancelot Barrabas Quail and the contemporary artist as trickster, Heath Bunting. Finally, I will make connections to the radical roots of Wrocław itself with its own histories of alternativity and pranksterism.

Provo pranksterism in the Sixties

...demonstrate for demonstration's sake, provoke for provocation's sake. Resist for resistance's sake!

The White Bicycle Plan of 1966, involving the free distribution of bicycles in the city of Amsterdam, was just one of the imaginative initiatives of the short-lived but highly influential movement known as Provo. Between 1965 and 1967, the Provo issued manifestos on squatters' rights, blueprints for social utopias, staged anarchic performances, created spontaneous happenings and directed riots. In particular though, the Provo's use of public pranks, theatrical stunts and a gamut of playful strategies – diversionary tactics, hoaxes, disobedient rhetorics, silliness and buffoonery – amounted to a kind of politics of *funruliness*.

For a brief time at least, the Provo resisted institutional incorporation and they did so provocatively, disruptively and collectively, spawning a whole series of rhizomatic 'temporary autonomous zones'. Their ecological initiatives, audacious demands and joyous unruliness reverberated throughout Europe and beyond, anticipating the ethos of radical and playful social interaction, mutual aid and free exchange later explored by groups such as the Diggers in New York and San Francisco. Provo acts, tactics and rhetorics had resonances and legacies for a whole range of contemporary creative practices of political provocation, from flash-mobbing and culture-jamming to other contemporary rogueish and piratic acts of collective artistic intervention.

Robert Jasper Grootveld, the shamanic trickster

Robert Jasper Grootveld, a pivotal figure in the Provo, was an archetypal trickster. The perverse activities of Grootveld and, by extension, Provo, resonated with an artistic genealogy of nonsense that ran back from happenings through Dada and Futurism to Alfred Jarry. In 1966, Harry Mulisch captured the chaotic character of one of Grootveld's self-consciously shamanistic midnight performances which had all the paraphernalia of a religious cult.

...when the electric clock by the Lutheran Church on the Spui pointed to the zero hour of midnight, the high priest appeared from an alleyway in full pontifical, sometimes daubed with paint, sometimes masked, and began walking magical cir-

cles round the Nicotine Demon while his disciples applauded and sang the Ugge-Ugge song. Sometimes there were hundreds listening to his sermons from the pedestal. They handed him paper, which he placed round the Lieverdje and wood, alcohol and matches...

Grootveld, a maverick character with an idiosyncratic background was an ardent anti-smoking activist. From 1964, in an attempt to highlight how Dutch tobacco companies were profiting from the cancer-forming addiction of cigarettes, he had been creating weekly happenings at night, with rituals and games (often culminating in bonfires) in the centre of Amsterdam. With a flair for public exhibitionism and pranks, Grootveld created a series of bizarre events and 'happenings': for example, in his 'Anti-smoking Temple' – a shed near the Leidesplein – he 'exorcised' evil spirits. Happenings usually involved vast quantities of smoke (although, paradoxically, Grootveld was a chain-smoker) and the trappings of tribal ritual performed in full *faux* 'ceremonial' dress with chants, relics and offerings. His 'Marihu' project, focusing on marijuana, involved numerous participants in a plethora of street games, events and the issuing of various manifestoes which used confusing wordplays and puns. Initially, Grootveld's antics were tolerated by the authorities and a mass following of youth developed. A series of incidents with the police ensued and, from the middle of 1964, Grootveld gravitated to the Spui where he conducted his ritual happenings at the Lieverdje statue, 'het Amsterdamse lieverdje' (Amsterdam's little darling).

In May 1965, Roel van Duyn went with a group of anarchists to one of Grootveld's night-time happenings and issued 'Provo' leaflets, highlighting the fascist connections of the Dutch royal family and urging protest action at the wedding, planned for the following March. This intervention provided the catalyst for the instigation of the Provo phenomenon. Following a build-up of protests and activities ahead of the royal event – including the production (and confiscation) of copious anti-royalist literature, the smearing of white paint on various symbolic monuments and government buildings, the lampooning of burgomasters and civic officials and the presentation of anti-wedding presents – Provo activists orchestrated a protest happening with leaflets, chants and smoke bombs. The situation quickly escalated and the protestors were met with violent suppression by the police. Public chaos

ensued amidst an atmosphere of hysteria more akin to farce, accompanied by hyperbole in the international press.

Homo ludens

The realm of magic isn't the kingdom of *homo economicus* or *homo industrialis*, but of *homo ludens*, of man and woman the player, an idea so dear to Henri Lefebvre's ludic concept of what everyday life *ought to be*. Everyday politics, too, necessitates fun, means creating a stir and kicking up a fuss; play nourishes politics just as political people should be themselves *homo ludens*.

Over the next couple of years, this coming together of prankish happenings with the subversive ideas of anarchism eventually spread confusion and a kind of infectious *panic* amongst the city authorities and police – creating a Dadaistic counter-world of tricksters and *homo ludens*. Exploiting the insurrectionary potential of pranks was a distinctive Provo strategy. The carnivalesque atmosphere created at various sites around the city, conjured up *homo ludens* – the figure associated with the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga's seminal earlier study of 'play' as an elemental aspect of culture.

Besides using games, humour and pranks as a strategy, Provo events played with the idea of the 'magic' act, with Grootveld as self-appointed chief shaman, presenting himself as a shape-shifter. Van Duyn pinpointed this, describing anarchists as "red men with an inclination towards black magic". The Provo created a ghostly 'smoke-screen' through which people would appear on the streets and evaporate into nothingness. And then, abracadabra, the apple graphic appeared all over Amsterdam (the 'magic centre of the world') and beyond. The invisibility of Provo, underlined by the practice of 'whiting' out had all the characteristics of an audacious vanishing act, a magic trick.

Deploying the 'trick' of 'whiteness', the Provo produced a succession of practical 'white plans', such as the White Housing Plan, White Chicken Plan, White Chimney Plan and White Schools Plan. The most famous of all – the White Bikes Plan (*Witte Fiets Plan*) – was a kind of 'happening' but it was also one of a series of manifestoes or blueprints for living. The idea was simple: it made efficient use of resources with creative flair. In a protest against the urban pollution, Schimmelpenninck proposed that the centre of Amsterdam be closed

to traffic. Overnight, Provo activists 'appropriated' bikes, painted them white and then 'redistributed' them free for anyone to use. As this practice was deemed unlawful, the police confiscated the bicycles and proceeded to charge Provo activists. Apart from being a shrewd act of tricksterism, the White Bikes Plan was, as Schubert put it, about finding "imaginative direct action solutions to immediate close at hand problems of daily life".

With divisions over tactics and strategies, the demise of the Provo movement was complex but inevitable. Importantly, in the immediate aftermath, characteristically tricksterist Provo practices continued in various guises. At the end of the Sixties, van Duyn briefly spread his 'Pixie parliamentarianism' with the libertarian Kabouter movement and later with his Panic-Sowers and Panicology. Provo influence is extensive if diffuse: one of the most obvious, if largely unacknowledged, practical legacies has been the adoption of community bike schemes across Europe. However, we are concerned here with the artistic strategies of pranksterism and, in this respect, the Provo certainly influenced numerous countercultural groups in the Sixties and subsequently, including the British artist-performance troupe Welfare State International (WSI).

Lancelot Icarus Handyman Barrabas Quail, the 'New Age' trickster

Various described as "dream-weavers, purveyors of images, sculptors of visual poetry, civic magicians and engineers of the imagination", using fire, ice, sound and light, WSI's activities were an amalgam of happenings, feasting, music-making and performance. The creative techniques and aesthetic vision of WSI, set up by John Fox in 1968, were rooted in the work of international groups such as el Teatro Campesino, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the US-based Bread and Puppet Theatre – but the politics of radical activism, anarchism, Situationism and the Provo were important factors.

Over forty years of work, WSI's repertoire was extensive but the kinds of multimedia practices they adopted were established by the start of the Seventies. Besides drawing on popular traditions such as mummery and pantomime, WSI also incorporated the avant-gardism of Yves Klein, Fluxus, Joseph Beuys and John Cage. WSI created happenings, events or assembled environments with acrobats, jazz, light shows and film. Performances might in-

volve wrestlers, musicians, fire-eaters, dancers, expanding on a basis of rehearsed material through improvisational techniques.

Welfare State's alternative aesthetics embraced temporary 'site-specific' multi-media performance, celebratory feasting and new forms of processional art – in doing so, they brought together Jungian archetypal myth-making, a Blakeian vision typically reflected in Sixties' Pop and English counterculture – along with a rhetoric of magic and ritual. However, one particularly character who featured in their projects, happenings and performances through to 2006, encapsulated this archetypal New Age myth-making vision – in multiple guises and forms, this was the trickster figure of *Lancelot Icarus Handyman Barrabas Quail*.

Jamie Proud's alter-ego, Lancelot Barrabas Quail, later billed as "Britain's new folk hero (a working-class hermaphrodite strong-man)", first appeared in 1972 at Surrey Hall in Brixton. Thereafter, he became a recurring reference point for WSI. In September that year, the company spent a month conducting the *Travels of Lancelot Quail*, a kind of processional theatrical event which roved from Glastonbury through Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, to end on a submarine off Land's End. A year later, WSI drove their mobile community into Burnley in Lancashire, a Northern working-class mill-town with a rapidly growing Asian population and a rapidly declining industrial base, and initiated a five-year residency as artists in the community.

Working out of an entourage of caravans and lorries on a reclaimed rubbish tip, they spent three months working with young people from the surrounding housing estates, improvising with junk to create a makeshift labyrinthine environment through which the audience then roamed. This provided the backdrop for *Beauty and The Beast* – a performed narrative featuring the mythic trickster figure, Lancelot Barrabas Quail.

Lancelot Quail, Britain's new folk hero (a working-class hermaphrodite strong man) was presumed lost on Her Majesty's submarine Andrew...after following a mermaid on a ley line trail across SW England last September...Lancelot Quail is living on a rubbish tip in Burnley..he is trapped in a labyrinth, but is constructing home-made wings and an elaborate radio telescope. Although Lancelot has lost the mermaid for ever, he is still seeking Beauty. The Beast and the Winter Tree King are hunting

him down, but with luck on Spring Bank Holiday Monday, he will escape in one time or another...

Many other large-scale spectacular projects followed. In November 1973, WSI created its first large-scale bonfire event which later evolved into *Parliament in Flames* staged in Burnley in 1976 with an audience of 10,000 people and restaged in various other towns through the 1970s. But the mythical figure of Lancelot Icarus Handyman Barabas Quail – an amalgam of magic and mythical references with a hotch-potch of signifiers of ‘Englishness’, operated as a constant comi-tragic shape-shifter, a catalyst for the social imagination.

Heath Bunting, contemporary provocateur and ‘con-artist’

My third and final trickster is a cultural activist and provocateur, the contemporary artist Heath Bunting. Neither the cultish shaman of Grootveld, nor the comi-tragic shape-shifter of Quail, Bunting is a *panic* figure. Referring back to the *Pan*-demonium project with which I started, Bunting is a playful hoaxer, a piratic internet operator, flitting and twittering across the web, sewing seeds of disruption, shape-shifting in the cracks of capitalism, dancing beneath its radar. As an elusive peripheral figure who resides somewhere in the interface between real life and the web, many of his projects play with fraudulence and stretch credulity: indeed, Bunting is something of a confidence trickster, a ‘con-artist.’

On bail for obscure aviation offences and for refusing to answer questions while detained under the Terrorism Act 2000, Bunting is permanently banned from the USA. One of his projects, *BorderXing 2001*, involved him (and others) in traversing a series of national borders in Europe – on foot and with no passport. Indeed, his prankster strategies are underpinned by serious political questions.

National borders are increasingly frontlines of political and social dissent. Asylum-seeking and political migrations are some of the most significant issues of our time. Heath Bunting’s *BorderXing Guide* website primarily consists of documentation of walks that traverse national boundaries, without interruption from customs, immigration, or border police. The work comments on the way in which movement between borders is restricted by governments and associated bureaucracies.

Paradoxically, Bunting skates on the boundaries of artist and activist whilst garnering support from

‘establishment’ institutions such as the Royal Society of the Arts and the Arts Council of England which validate his operations as art practice. A current extensive project which explores social and economic status and the legal status of identities, has involved him mapping and subverting patterns of surveillance and identity, producing false documents, fake papers, creating non-existent addresses, forging passports. From his net-art of the 1990s to his current activities, Bunting has spun a web of disconnections, decoys and dummies. Merging ‘real’ life with a counterfeit existence, we are never really quite sure who is tricking whom.

Spreading the Dionysian spores of *Pan*-ic

In a melding of unruly politics and cultural activism, Provo-style strategies of creative dissent – hoaxes, carnival, festivity, pranksterism and participative forms of play – have become commonplace, contagious even, on the streets, across the internet and in the public sphere. Groups such as the CIRCA, the ‘clown army’, declare “absurd war on absurd war” and a global mass of individuals have adopted Black Bloc tactics – disguise, anonymity and masking – as tools of protest and dissent. Some of the most effective anti-capitalist tricksters have been those whose practices have existed in a nether world, often anonymous or ‘invisible’ collectives who have instigated ‘mockstitutions’ or those operating as multiple entities, such as Claire Fontaine or The Invisible Committee, sometimes in the artworld, sometimes outside it. Gregory Sholette writes about this *creative dark matter* as something that makes up the bulk of the artistic activity in our post-industrial society.

It includes makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, self-organized practices – all work made and circulated in the shadows of the formal art world, some of which might be said to emulate cultural dark matter by rejecting art world demands of visibility, and much of which has no choice but to be invisible.

Tricksterish artistic and performative strategies have been adopted in the public sphere, not only in the spirit of joyous disobedience but to create political havoc within the current global context of anti-capitalist activities and occupations. Identifying a selection of tricksterist practices as *countercultural* has been the modest aim of this paper: an

examination of precisely how (or how effectively) these practices operate politically to challenge capitalism would require specific reference to recent and emergent post-Marxist and post-anarchist discourses.

However, to return to the Polish context, the adoption of tricksterist strategies for radical political ends is, of course, familiar in Wrocław, as it has been the setting for a series of events on Trickster strategies, including The European Cultural Congress in 2011. The Congress' activities and events looked back to Wrocław's own particular history of alterity. In the 1980s, a Dionysian Provo-style *pan-ic* was spread by the Orange Alternative, headed by Waldemar Frydrych. Using the tactics of contagion and staging happenings, their surrealist but anti-Communist manifestations of the viral 'gnomes' – culminating in the 'Revolution of Dwarves' in 1988 – resonated directly with the radical histories of disruptive signs and motifs, harking back especially to the Dutch Provo of the Sixties.

Today, the Wrocław 'gnomes' have become famous in their own right. Since the 1980s, there is barely any trace of the graffiti 'gnome' images of the Orange Alternative. But a horde of over 150 small bronze gnomes have populated the city centre. Hidden behind lamp-posts on Wrocław's main square and perched on walls and buildings, they form part of a popular tourist trail. Their alternative history of radicality has been stripped away. Perhaps, one day, the Dionysian spores of Pan will re-connect them.

So, Pan-demonium goes on. In all its forms and guises. Pan proliferates surreptitiously, flitting and twittering across the web, playing quietly in the streets, spreading temporary networks and transitory communities, sowing panic and the disruptive seeds of creativity and disorder across the globe. Great Pan is dead! Long Live Pan!

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Defense of the cross – a spontaneous social movement or artistic provocation?

Defense of the cross was set spontaneously in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw after a plane crash (which occurred near Smoleńsk), in which Polish President Lech Kaczyński with his wife, and ninety-four persons were killed. Attempts to move the cross from the Krakowskie Przedmieście Avenue at the end of national mourning and burial of the victims were blocked by a group of the cross defenders, who prayed in front of it guarding it round the clock¹. This problem became a media spectacle of supporters who established Defenders of the Cross Social Initiative and its opponents. Both groups organized demonstrations in front of the Presidential Palace, causing fights and interference with the Police and Municipal Police. What is important for me in this work is not only the Polish – Polish war of the cross, but a media spectacle, in which one of the main characters became an actor, Mariusz Bulski. His attitude after the Smoleńsk crash and earlier collaboration with the artist Artur Żmijewski may provoke thinking and discussion, resulting in a question posed by me in the title of that essay: whether the mood of the Cross defenders was artificially fueled to expose Polish society for the purpose of art? This question I leave un-

answered, hoping only to show and bring together some facts.

On 10 April 2010 there was a plane crash when Polish military aircraft TU – 154 was trying to land in Smoleńsk. 96 members of state delegation – including President Lech Kaczyński – died that day. After the announcement about the crash, crowds began to gather and pray for the victims in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw, they brought ever-burning fires and flowers. The moods of the Poles during the national mourning – who arrived at the Krakowskie Przedmieście, to say goodbye to the presidential couple and during the funeral ceremony in Kraków – were filmed by documentary Ewa Stankiewicz and journalist John Pospieszalski. The film *Solidarni 2010* (Solidary 2010) is a documentary recording conversations with Poles, their views on the crash, the state of Polish politics and relations between Poland and Russia. The document gives voice to the supporters of the lost President, opponents of the Polish government and the people who suspect Russian attack and abhor Russia, blaming the country's authorities and the Polish government for the disaster. Shortly after airing this movie, it turned out that the authenticity of emotion and the randomness of filmed people has been questioned. A figure, which aroused the greatest controversy, is Mariusz Bulski, a young man

¹ Kominek (2010).

speaking in 90–minutes film up to 8 times, mainly during the first 16 minutes of the document. What attracts the viewer's attention are his "tears", which seem to be artificial and forced. He was the first person in the image, who in the sixth minute of movie talks about conspiracy and the assassination of President by Russian KGB.

After his statements, conversations of other people who have similar views, and they suspect the attack, are presented. This way of handling scenes might suggest that Bulski plays in the film a role of the narrator, whose statements are the beginning of the thread continued by others. Analysis of the scenes in the film allows us to distinguish Mariusz Bulski from other interlocutors: Bulski is presented against the backdrop of the Presidential Palace or candles (a few shots of various backgrounds) while most of the characters speaks standing in a group, side by side. Mariusz Bulski is depicted en face, not looking at the camera, in contrast to the majority of speakers. Their cry – if it appears in front of the camera – appears to be authentic, their words sincere, characterized by naturalness. Non-verbal communication used by Bulski (facial expressions, tone of voice, faltering voice, speech rate, pauses between words) gives the impression of theatricality, sometimes arouses ridicule both the theatrical expression, as well as the same words, like "when the man who has blood on his hands hugs my Prime Minister, he just hugged my premiere"². This character aroused the most controversy to the public, undermining the authenticity of the *Solidarni 2010* documentary, not only by the inauthenticity of his expression, but mainly by his profession – he is a professional actor, known mainly from episodic roles in the Polish series. Following the disclosure of this information both Mariusz Bulski and movie authors repulsed attacks from media, ensuring that performance of Bulski in the project was a private person state, not actor's³. He defended his performance, arguing that despite the fact that he is an actor, he is also entitled to have his own, private opinion.

An article published in the "Polityka" said about the surprise of Bulski's friends, who is known as a Buddhist and anti-clerical. Bulski denies he was a Buddhist (his wife is a Chinese)⁴.

The role of Mariusz Bulski was not only to play in the film *Solidarni 2010*. He became the leading and most recognizable leader of the Defenders of the Cross Social Initiative. The very same Cross which was set spontaneously by scouts on 15 April 2010 on the sidewalk in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw. A plaque was nailed onto the cross with an inscription saying: "This Cross is an appeal of the Scouts to the public authorities and society to build a monument here"⁵.

The cross was present on Krakowskie Przedmieście up to 16 September 2010, when it was transferred to the chapel in the Presidential Palace. An earlier attempt to transfer it to the Academic St. Anne's Church on 3 August failed, even though the agreement regarding this case was signed by the Office of the President of Poland, The Warsaw Metropolitan Curia, and scouting organizations. Defenders group – headed by Mariusz Bulski – opposed to the transfer of the Cross. On 10 November 2011 the Cross was moved from the chapel at the Presidential Palace to the Loreto Chapel in St. Anne Church.

Mariusz Bulski together with other members of the Defenders of the Cross Social Initiatives spent many weeks by the cross. Bulski was the representative of the defenders in the media, he gave statements, called for manifestatnions⁶, destroyed barriers placed on 14 August 14, 2010 separating the crowd from the Cross. Bulski organized press conferences, at which he made statements, and explained the position of the defenders, regarding transferring the cross to another location, and building a dignified memorial, commemorating the victims of the crash, or made critical remarks about the table embedded into the Presidential Palace's facade. In summer 2010, the most ardent defenders of the Cross could be recognized by the color of clothes that they wore. Thanks to white shirts they wore, they were easily distinguished from the crowd. In the same shirt Bulski was also showed.

Among the people positively related to the Pospieszalski's documentary was artist Artur Żmijewski, known for his leftist views, who in "Krytyka Polityczna" defended the film: in an interview with Paweł Smoleński for the newspaper "Gazeta Wyborcza" he said that this film defended itself

² Kominek (2010).

³ Bazak (2010).

⁴ Kołodziejczyk (2010).

⁵ SE (2010).

⁶ YT (2010).

because it was authentic⁷. Referring to the content of statements of persons' appearing in the *Solidarni 2010*, Żmijewski says: "At Pospieszalski and Stankiewicz, crowd unexpectedly receive a voice – a critical and demanding one. Voice formulating an expectation, that people should not be spoken the language of manipulation and falsehood to. The voice of the masses suddenly resounds meaningfully – and what is perhaps the most frightening – is that people can speak with language that is understood and reasonable"⁸.

Żmijewski is interested in the film regarding any discussion with its characters, who express controversial views: "Such film as *Solidarni 2010* does not bear fear in me, but curiosity. I wonder how a discussion with those who speak in it could look like? Maybe it would be more interesting than succumbing to the fears of the elite, that the very same people will arrange our life"⁹.

He proposes to look at this film as a source of knowledge about the collective hero of the film, which may contribute to increase knowledge about Poland. Artur Żmijewski admits to an anthropological curiosity, and the film may be a selective survey of Polish society.

This artist – which seems to be important for the subject of this study – not only defends the document *Solidarni 2010*, but also refers to attacks on Mariusz Bulski, defending the right for actor to have his own opinion.

As Karol Sienkiewicz remarks, Artur Żmijewski "is regarded as an radical artist." His biggest achievements include representing Poland on 51st Venice Biennale (2005), where he presented his work *Powtórzenie* (Repetition)¹⁰.

Żmijewski creates movies based on his own method of making films. As he says: "I shoot provoked, made by me situations". According to Joanna Mytkowska, he runs by precise methods, and his films are answers to questions he poses. He builds a precise scenario, provoking situations or introduces characters in the film for whom the question of man's condition is essential. But it should be underscored that he intervenes in the action, intentionally manipulating it to achieve the desired effect, as in the *Repetition*.

The scope of Artur Żmijewski's work in recent years reflects realization of demands that the artist signed in 2007 in his manifesto, *Stosowane sztuki społeczne* (Applied social arts)¹¹. In *Applied social arts* Żmijewski proposes the restoration of the art's efficiency, so that the knowledge that is its product, became a part of the knowledge in the scientific discourse, and not exclusively aesthetic. According to the artist, art is to discuss the politics, despite its shortcomings, and artist himself is to be an unconscious medium of social processes. Żmijewski's manifesto defines the role of the artist referring to his ability to provoke discourse and participate in it. Żmijewski's views crystallized in the manifesto are reflected in his current creative activity.

This work raised the three – seemingly – unrelated issues. The first one is the figure of Mariusz Bulski, who debuted in the "post-Smoleńsk social discussion" through his appearance in *Solidarni 2010*, in which – in front of the audience's eyes – he spoke about the change that occurred in him after the death of President Lech Kaczyński, and led him to become a passionate leader of group defending the Cross. The second issue is the social contestation, associated with an attempt to force the construction of the "worthy" monument outside the Presidential Palace, to commemorate the victims of the Smoleńsk crash and defense of the Cross – placed there in the days of national mourning. The third one concerns Artur Żmijewski, the artist who is focusing primarily on the interests of contemporary social confrontations and role of the art in public spaces. These topics, however, connect via Mariusz Bulski, who starred in one of Artur Żmijewski's film: *Repetition*.

The film *Repetition* from 2005 is the record of repeating the famous psychological experiment. "Stanford Prison Experiment" was conducted by a group of U.S. scientists led by the eminent psychologist Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1971. This experiment investigated the psychological consequence of the simulation of life in prison and was to divide the group of twenty-four students into prisoners and guards, and then put them in jail, specially created in the basement of a university building. Students – physically and mentally healthy men, never offended – played their assigned roles of prisoners and guards for six days, when the experiment was abandoned after

⁷ Żmijewski (2010 a).

⁸ Żmijewski (2010 b).

⁹ Żmijewski (2010 a).

¹⁰ Sienkiewicz (2009).

¹¹ Żmijewski (2007: 24–29).

the revolt of the prisoners and planning their escape, and after release into the wild of a mentally retarded prisoner No. 8612. The immediate cause of interruption of the experiment was the escalating guards' aggression against the prisoners, and also Dr. Christina Maslach's objections, who was the first to challenge the moral aspect of the experiment¹².

The experiment showed that the students quickly went into their assigned roles, identifying themselves with them, and behaved in an appropriate manner. Psychological and even physical violence used by guards, made prisoners feel weak and powerless. The discussion on lessons learned from the Zimbardo's experiment, flared over the world once more, after the discovery of acts of violence, committed by the American soldiers over detainees in prisons in Guantanamo, Cuba and Abu Ghraib, Afghanistan. The observations of psychologists at Stanford confirmed that under favorable circumstances, the person is able to commit acts of aggression, violence and even sadism, which in normal circumstances would not be triggered. Implementing the *Repetition* Żmijewski recreated Stanford's experiment conditions in Warsaw.

The experiment was attended mostly by unemployed young men. Seven of them were selected for the role of prisoners, nine played the role of guards. The men were selected, based on the research and psychological tests.

Artur Żmijewski – just like Zimbardo – became jail warden: he headed the entire project, commanded the guards, he urged them to tighten discipline, or fired them if deemed unnecessary. The whole project took seven days. Ended however, unlike the experiment at Stanford.

At first the guards identified themselves with the fate of prisoners, gratify them, sympathized. Prisoners tried to obey the rules, respectfully refer to the supervisors. Following remarks from the warden, (which was Żmijewski) they began to use more discipline, which resulted in breaking an unwritten agreement. Both inmates and guards entered their roles. The guards tried to be intransigent and the prisoners were demonstrating their opposition and contempt. With the advancement of the experiment both parties began to show their true emotions and some prisoners even used their right to terminate the participation in the experiment for any reason.

Because of declining number of prisoners, the number of guards was decreased, among which from the very beginning a young man stood out. During the project he was appointed by Żmijewski as the head of the other guards, which intensified his sense of power over both the prisoners and the guards. At the end of the experiment this guard carried away his role, becoming a despotic figure in relation to prisoners. He punished them for the slightest offense, which focused all the dissatisfaction and frustration of the prisoners on him. He penalized their mockery with more intense penalties, trying to keep his position even among his subordinates, who drew his attention to the impropriety of his behavior. He realized that he became the main hero of the experiment and the artist is waiting for his defeat and that he becomes a man capable of violence. So he decided to break with the division for guards and prisoners. He led to reconciliation with prisoners – as a sign he shave his head, as they did earlier on his command. The project ended with all participants' rebellion against the organizer of experiment.

Artur Żmijewski's experiment therefore leads to different outcomes than Zimbardo's, showing that in stressful conditions, people seek more for settlement than the conflict. It proves that people do not necessarily identify themselves with the possessed power.

The *Repetition* reveals a manipulation applied to the world of science (especially psychologists) and the audience – especially the audience which is critical to repeat unethical experiments involving human beings. It turns out – what the artist does not make public – that the man embodying the character of the guards' supervisor, whose attitude shows the goodness of human nature, is a professional actor.

Putting an actor as one of the main characters of the experiment was an intended action of the artist; it turns out that the film "Repetition" is not the registration of the experiment, but a game with the audience, including especially the scientists and psychologists. The actor, who ended the experiment in a spectacular way, who opposed authority ceases to be a positive hero – which proves the fallibility of scientists. He becomes a participant in the manipulative process instead, written by Artur Żmijewski¹³. This actor is Mariusz Bulski. When

¹² Zimbardo (1999).

¹³ Biszczak-Kulczycka (2010: 42–43).

it came to light that in Żmijewski's film such an important role was played by a professional actor – like in *Solidarni 2010*, some doubts about the authenticity of his behavior appeared. Bulski countered these allegations, explaining that as an unemployed actor he is willing to take any kind of work, and his occupation has no impact on the course of the experiment, since he appeared there as a person, not an actor.

Mariusz Bulski's actions as a defender of the Cross and converted patriot, raise doubts about the authenticity of his intentions through the prism of earlier participation in artistic activities of Artur Żmijewski. Żmijewski also used post-Smołęńsk social events for its latest art project, which is the film *Katastrofa* (Catastrophe). The project tells the story of the presidential plane crash and the social mood, which was caused by it. Chronologically, the portrayed events are also commented by the Russians themselves. Żmijewski in his project allowed both sides of the Cross conflict to speak.

What is interesting in this film is that there is no Mariusz Bulski character among the leading defenders of the Cross. His silhouette or its part can be seen in the shot twice, but there are no scenes with his presence, which may be surprising, in terms of the important function he held among the defenders of the Cross and its activity at the Presidential Palace during the entire war of the Cross.

The period of the war of the cross in front of the Presidential Palace has become a socially and culturally interesting spectacle, which divided the Poles, forced discussion about the place of religious symbols in public space as well as the relationship of citizens to politics, the media and the church, which occur to this day.

This phenomenon was considered in terms of psychological, sociological, political, and not in the context of artistic activities. The question posed in the title of this essay remains valid, because in the action at the Krakowskie Przedmieście such artists as Artur Żmijewski and Mariusz Bulski – known from the earlier, controversial project – were involved. This work puts the subject by presenting a few facts that initially appear to be unrelated to each other. A deeper analysis shows however, that what unites them may prove to be an artistic idea, which is unknown to the recipient.

Artur Żmijewski is known for manipulation during creation of his documents, which show and even expose unconscious social phenomena.

Mariusz Bulski performing in *Repetition* became his most famous hero, whose attitude could argue with psychological knowledge about man. Maybe a cooperation between those two artists also took place after the Smoleńsk plane crash, baring Polish society full of divisions? Probably we will never know how it really was, and – like with the film *Repetition* – we are left to believe in the genuineness of the attitude of the actor Mariusz Bulski.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Trickster games in the public space. Between art and culture jamming

“Pranks aren’t reactive like acts of revenge. They don’t punish, they provoke.... Revenge is a science, pranking is an art”¹

“Illusion is a revolutionary weapon”²

In my paper I wish to address the issue of the relation of trickster to a convention – a convention of representing, acting, to conventional signs in the public space, that either indirectly or directly refer to the marketing practices, by parodying them or using similar methods to, for example, advertising campaigns. Analyzing actions of this kind, it is somewhat difficult to say what was first – were it the artists that inspired the corporate ‘artisticness’ of the adverts, or have the artists become exploring the market strategies? Julian Stallabrass, for example, who is quite conservative in his opinions, claims that “high art may try constantly to work against the production of mass culture, but it is prey to rapid assimilation as advertisers and designers plunder it for ideas and prestige”³. What he points out here is a complex matter of coexistence of different kinds of media nowadays and, therefore, I would like to show how one can link works of art or actions of

different quality, making the intention and way of using particular media a criterion of their ‘similarity’ (or, maybe better, ‘equality’). I wish to anchor my approach in the consideration of Richard Rorty, who created the notion of a liberal ironist⁴, a figure of an ambivalent character, functioning in public and private spheres, visibly differentiated by the philosopher: in the sphere of privacy the ironist reaps individual benefits from a Socratic irony pushed *ad extremum*, while the public sphere – she is a liberal, sensitive to human suffering. I think that such attitude is, in a sense, identical to that of a trickster – that, who uses a joke and parody to address often important problems. In his philosophy, Rorty refers to the possibilities of language, presenting the liberal ironist as a person who, by expressing something, often applies farce, since – in order not to get into banality – she will not use any idea in a way that would grasp its point or essence, since there is no such essence, as Rorty thinks. The liberal ironist represents an exemplary attitude of questioning the possibilities of language we use, and therefore all judgments and convictions. In the context of the ironic attitude, Leszek Kołakowski wrote about the antagonism between the philosophy preserving the absolute and one that questions

¹ Branwyn (1997: 277).

² Burroughs (1970: 12).

³ Stallabrass (1996: 5).

⁴ Rorty (1989).

it: "This is an antagonism of priests and jesters, and in almost every historic period the philosophy of priests and jesters are the two most general forms of a culture of mind".⁵

Activities of so-called pranksters and culture jammers are rooted in the media, but play also an important role in decoding the meanings in the public space of every metropolis. The billboards they transform are a part of a counter-culture referring to the activities of the Situationists (1957–1968)⁶ and the strategy of *détournement* they developed – that is hijacking or misappropriation, basing on turning the capitalist message against itself. It is most of all about exploring the unimportant elements of media, such as flicks, photos or newspaper pieces and putting them in a new context, generating new content (*minor détournements*) or about using the important political or philosophical ideas and great works of art to mediate uncomfortable contents also by shifting their context (*deceptive détournements*). Moreover, more and more often do the artists apply the Situationist practices, placing their works in the public space in a way that they play with an existing iconic (or social) order, attempting at devaluation of the culture of spectacle.

Umberto Eco in his text *Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare* presented in 1967, coined a term 'semiotic guerrilla' as means of protest against the mainstream culture of the mass media. According to the author, the actions of culture jammers aim at 'jamming the signal' emitted by the media⁷. Their activities consist in saturating the system, amplifying the rhetorically contradictory information in order to evoke a quality change. In case of a trickster and an artist using the holes in the system to break and sabotage it, it is symptomatic that after some time such actions become a part of a marketing system that willingly reaches for parodies of itself. Pranksters and culture jammers step against globalization, corporate capitalism, and thus, against the dehumanization of culture – why would not therefore the artists do the same? From the curator's point of view, such actions are even encouraged, as breaking the order, making noise and playing with schemes is a live-giving factor strengthening both the curators and the artists themselves. And it is not only about direct provocations, but about ephemeral actions

based on popping subsequent balloons filled with ideologies.

Art of subvertising⁸

In 2003 the *Adbusters* magazine, a guide and a bible of culture jammers and pranksters, published one of its most ambitious projects, an anti-branding campaign set against the giant on the sportswear market and producer of all sorts of gadgets, the Nike company. The authors created a new brand of shoes and called it 'Blackspot'. The shoes were supposed to be answer to the Nike shoes, especially the sneakers produced by the company, and what comes with it, the whole philosophy built around the brand. The shoes, existing on billboards that referred to the billboards of the famous company, were given an appropriate context – dignified working conditions in the production process, usage of ecological material: "Blackspot is an affront to the consciousness of hyper capitalism and profit dominated boardroom policies. Blackspot is about more than marketing a brand or deconstructing the meaning of cool – it's about changing the way the world does business."⁹

The campaign was a reaction to the supposed means of production based on equality, ethics and good treatment of human element, promoted by the companies of this kind. It has to be pointed out that Nike based its branding on advertising as a company for individualists who take their own path, are nonconformists and have their own style. The trickster motive here was about refuting this false image of a brand which is based upon a mass 'individualism'. Important here is the parodist aspect of the posters by Adbusters – the parody turns the world upside down and at the same time preserves the rhetorical binary oppositions, it preserves even stronger the hierarchical division, despite aiming at its overthrowing as a foundation. Whereas, it seems that the essence of the trickster activities should be turning one's back on the attempt to set the rules of the game – we use irony, laugh at and

⁵ Kołakowski (1989: 290).

⁶ Harold (2004: 189–211).

⁷ Eco (1986: 135).

⁸ "Subvertising is an attempt to turn the iconography of the advertisers into a noose around their neck. If images can create a brand, they can also destroy one. A subvert is a satirical version or the defacing of an existing advert, a *détournement*, an inversion designed to make us forget consumerism and consider instead social or political issues", Barley (2001).

⁹ In: <http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/blackspot,vic> wed on 04.03.2012.

denounce the system, but do not dictate what one should do or think. This is why the prankster culture jamming activities are the rank-and-file guerrilla initiatives, usually illegal, and thus not following any rules. They are trickster as a rule, they base on a direct intervention in the media urban space – the billboards gain new image, logotypes of known brands are ironically transformed and political messages involved in the service against the monopolization of thought.

Media as a medium. Art of *détournement*

Let's present the most famous artwork, to which the culture jammers refer – a work by Duchamp, who ironically commented on the sacred artifacts, drawing mustache on Mona Liza's face (*L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919) and thus doing something on a shape of *détournement*¹⁰. However, in art, we more and more often encounter a direct turn to the media culture and consumerism. The most vivid example of exploitation of the possibilities that marketing strategies provide is the action *The Czech Dream*, a large-scale hoax and at the same time a title of a documentary by Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda (the action took place in February 2004). The authors, not really being artists but directors, made fun of the system of advertising which they used to organize a large-scale prank. The action consisted in opening of a huge supermarket in the Letňany district of Prague (where Tesco and Globus supermarkets are located) on May 31st 2003. Before that date they had organized a very intensive ad campaign in press, radio and television. The messages of the ads subversively read 'Don't Come!', 'Don't Buy!', etc. The hypermarket was located in a certain distance from the nearest road so those who wanted to reach it, had to go on foot across a meadow, seeing the wall of the supermarket – over 100 meters wide and several meters tall. The first customer turned up at 7 a.m. (according to the information the hypermar-

ket was supposed to open at 10:00), explaining the organizers that he had woken up that early so that he could see the Sun eclipse (there really was a Sun eclipse in the early morning in Europe on that day). In reality, the wall seen from the distance was only a dummy mounted on the scaffolding with a logo of the supposed *Český sen* company, known to the customers from the ad campaign; people heading for the 'hypermarket' and their reactions after realizing they had been fooled, were filmed. Only a part of the would-be customers understood the anti-consumerist message of the undertaking, some shamefully played down their naivety ('some fresh air never does you harm'), yet a large number of them demanded severe punishment for the organizers.

The film was awarded at festivals in Cracow, Jihlava, Ljubljana and Århus, on 8th September it was broadcasted by the German-French Arte television, on 26th January of the same year in Australia and 11th January 2007 in Israel. The film and the whole undertaking were funded by Czech ministry of culture.

Self-jamming art

In Poland, the most famous spectacle on the edge of art and marketing was the action of burning down a barn by Rafał Betlejewski, a copywriter who underwent a spiritual change and decided to share it with Poles to fight the national anti-Semitic attitude. In 2010 he realized the project, *I miss you, Jew*, which was an action based on putting those words on the walls in diverse places of Polish cities historically related to Jews. People willing to participate in the project were photographed by Rafał in a place characteristic of the remembered person. With an empty chair that would symbolize them. It was a discussion around the anti-Semitic events in Jedwabne from nine years ago that inspired Rafał's action. Additionally, Betlejewski created a web site where he encouraged people to put photos of themselves in those places. In one of interviews he said that 'with this action I would like to express my longing for Polish Jews, who were here and are not anymore. I wish to commemorate particular names and surnames – says Rafał Betlejewski and encourages the Polish to submit the names of Jews they wish to remember. Those that they know from literature or personally. Those who died during the war or left Poland in 1968.' As we can see he in-

¹⁰ Guy Debord called *détournement* a 'flexible language of anti-ideology'. He wrote: "Détournement is the opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority that is inevitably tainted by the very fact that it has become a quotation – a fragment torn from its own context and development, and ultimately from the general framework of its period and from the particular option (appropriate or erroneous) that it represented within that framework(...). It appears in communication that knows it cannot claim to embody any definitive certainty". (Debord, 2002: 64).

tended to create a particular space for dialogue, restricting it at the same time with national stereotypes and specific discourse which was somewhat naïve. Thereby, we can classify its role as a trickster to the role of an unconscious instigator who, in fact, aimed himself to play the role of national moral sense with quite unsophisticated media.

The practices of Betlejewski were broadly commented in the media and it is difficult not to agree with the statement, that he got lost somewhere between advertising and art: 'The most recent action of the performer Rafał Betlejewski – as the author himself states – was supposed to help Poles to cleanse from the sin of anti-Semitism. On 11th July, the 69th anniversary of the homicide in Jedwabne, a village outside Tomaszów Mazowiecki, a barn was burned down. (...) The Jewish and anti-Semitism were not discussed though' – write Katarzyna Świerczyńska and Anna Gram, relating the deciding moment of the happening: 'The performer took the burning of the barn on himself. To make it even more dramatic, he entered the barn and only then did he light a match. And next he wrote on Facebook «I risked life, evacuating from the already burning barn. Only one of my cameras burned down. Totally. A wonderful project, engaging on every level!». And although this 'wonderful project' was met with many voices of criticism, the artist did not take any strong opinions to himself(...)'.¹¹

While from the perspective of a conscious recipient his actions can be considered ironic and subversive, the declaration of Betlejewski himself, who perceives himself as an artist, reveals that he does not notice their ironic and parodical element and that he treats his accomplishments very seriously. He can be regarded as a perfect example of a not really successful marriage of art with marketing practices that Betlejewski does best. Intriguing is the fact that, being himself a part of a mass media culture and the government of souls (he created, among others, a controversial commercial for House company), he decided to apply his experience on this ground to promote himself as an artist. On one hand, he could be recognized as a trickster, but locating his practices in the context of bombastic statements, it seems that he is an indisputable and extremely unique example of a trickster who entrapped himself in his own prank. It appears therefore, that you cannot negate the system from

its inside, the jamming can take place only from the perspective of an observer who is not limited by the rules. And the same rules that the marketing follows are fatal to art unless doubled with a trickster irony.

Pranking in the public space as an anti-art manifesto

Another way of using the possibilities given by the public space is present in the works by the artist working under a pseudonym Peter Fuss, who became famous due to the controversial exhibition *Achtung!* at Nod Roxy Gallery in Prague, 2009, where he presented photographs, fragments from two movies, *Schindler's List* (1993) and *The Pianist* (2002), depicting German soldiers wearing bands with the Star of David symbol. But what links to culture jamming in his work are above all the posters that he has been hanging in Tricity since 2006. We do not know where and when he was born, actually we know nothing about him (just like with Banksy, yet Fuss claims that it is not the same strategy of using a pseudonym). He covers billboards with paper, on which he paints his own compositions with acrylic paint, also using previously prepared stencils. His work shows reference to political and social events, Polish absurdities, complexes and visual habits, as well as to contemporary art. The billboard *I Confuse Kaczyński with Kaczyński* is an allusion to the well-known image by Paweł Susid *I Confuse Stażewski with Strzemiński*.

He is also an author of the series presenting commentaries to everyday and political life: *Everyday I Am* and *Sometimes I feel ashamed to be Polish* that was exhibited in the Shipyard of Gdańsk. In 2006 he participated in the exhibition *Jesus Christ King of Poland* in Koszalin, during which he illegally installed in the public space a billboard referring to the internet portals promoting anti-Semitism: *Jews Out of the Catholic Country*¹² (ill. 1). Moreover, an integral part of the show were screens from some anti-Semitic websites, a list of Polish Jews published on the right wing site, polonica.net, and selected anti-Semitic comments of the listeners of Radio Maryja (conservative Catholic radio station). The artist himself commented his own project: 'Almost whole exhibition are quotations. Billboard is also composed of quotations. The peo-

¹¹ Świerczyńska, Gram (2010: 60–63).

¹² Borkowski, Piotrowska, Bochenek (2007).



Ill. 1. Peter Fuss, *Jews out of the Catholic country*, billboard, 2007, courtesy of the artist

ple on the billboards are those included on the list of Jews. (...)I heard voices of support from the nationalist organizations. Only after some time would they realize that something was wrong. That this Fuss is not 'our guy', that they were ridiculed. Those who supported me and wanted to go on a crusade against Jews with me took myself for being Jewish, or German, in any case, an enemy of Poland. This was what the perversity of this billboard consisted in."¹³ The fact of quoting the media, placing them in a new context so that they would provoke, is a direct application of Debord's category of *minor détournement*.

In June 2007 in Gdańsk's Modelarnia, and in the beginning of July during the Art Car Boot Fair in London he presented a plastic skull studded with glass entitled *For the Laugh of God* (ill. 2). It was a parody of the famous work *For the Love of God* by a British artist Damien Hirst, who studded a platinum skull with diamonds. While it is true that it is not an action in the public space, using the well-known work and the irony of this specific 'plagiarism' is a real prank. According to the artist, it is supposed to be a commentary to the blast and

the hurray-optimism with which the skull by Hirst was met (priced £50 million). 'The value of a material of which a work of art is made and a jeweler's craft should not determine its value. It is a trinket which cost £12 million to make. My skull is also shiny, and has been made for £250. Hirst's work was claimed to be the first masterpiece of the 21st century. Why not a super tackiness for big money?' The mockery of the art market rules (ill. 3) can be compared to this sort of diversifying actions regarding corporations – just like in the case of the shoes created by *Adbusters*. Peter Fuss says the following about his work: "My skull has been executed in five copies. Each one is hand-made, numbered and signed. Before one of them was presented at the art fair in London, others had already found their buyers. Two were sold to London, one to Belgium, one to Mexico. I sold them for £1000. The fifth skull will be sold to one who offers the highest prize. At the moment there are eight interested. The whole action is ironic in a way. Hirst has not sold his skull until today, I have already sold four, because they are cheaper."¹⁴

¹³ Kusiak-Brownstein, Kowalczyk (2007).

¹⁴ In: <http://art.blox.pl/2007/06/Czaszka-Petera-Fussa.html>, viewed on 10.10.2011.

Getting Serious. Art of Social Change

A difficult subject is referred to by Robert Rumas, who enters the city space with an impetus worthy of the best trickster. His best-known projects include *Hot Water Bottles x 8* and *City Manoeuvres*.

Hot Water Battles x 8 is a project carried out in 1994 (ill. 4). Rumas used there eight figures of Christ and Holy Mary, arranged them on Długi Targ pedestrian thoroughfare in Gdańsk, and placed them in large foil bags filled with water. The passers-by, as the artist had suspected, 'freed' the figures and carried them to the church nearby¹⁵. The project of the *City Manoeuvres* was conceived in 1998 and since 2000 it has been carried out in different cities (Gdańsk, Cracow, Baden Baden, Chicago, Tallinn, Szczecin, Vilnius, ill. 5). It consists in placing specially designed plates, reminding of road signs, in the public space. The plates inform where one can buy drugs, get beaten up, pray, have sex, bribe somebody, meet football fans, hang yourself, etc., thus being an ironic interference in the city space. As the artist wrote himself: "The action consisting on placing of the signposts in the public space is usually illegal and has to become anonymous. It may be classified as a part of 'urban partisan' trend however in many cases I am the initiator and the performer of the actions"¹⁶.

Conceptual *détournement*. Art of disappearing

The city structure is also used by the artists in action of more ephemeral character. Paweł Kowzan aka *dwaesha* is inscribed in the scheme of culture jammers' activities, negating or mocking all forms of herd mentality, professing 'good fun' and raising self-awareness of people, considered as individuals and not a common ruck devoid of the ability and possibility of judgment. The character of the actions by Kowzan, who is rather into playing a role of a contemporary art troubadour than preserving the gilding on the smooth surface of its bored monuments, is conceptual, yet anchored in cocking a snook at the system. What he does is often ordinary, but at the same time nothing that he does cannot exist without an appropriate commentary. This feature of his 'works' can be regarded as their weakness, yet it is the word, its spreading and pres-

ervation of often varying versions of the same event in the memory of (usually indirect) recipients that plays the key role there. Kowzan also shows the way taken by contemporary art, which, despite the terror of the image, goes beyond representation and becomes an artistic practice of people it fully engages, and next, naturally transforms itself into a sort of a rumor, legend, myth.

Paweł Kowzan works in a way that he does not impose himself on anyone, his persona remains invisible and the interventions are formed by building contexts on them, creating them with a rumor, commentary of all those who did not come across him. Everyone is an equal participant of a discussion and co-author of a story about particular action which finally becomes its crucial element. Yet the most important aspect of these practices is the effect they have on the surrounding, the mobilization of a community. Activities in the public space are often described from the perspective of moving a gallery onto a street, which is supposed to be a protest against the institutionalization of art. Nevertheless it is also worth noticing on, above all, the moving force of such interventions, on which focuses Szreder, describing *Oxygenator* by Rajkowska: "Instead of creating artifacts, the artist, applying the Beuys figure, creates social sculptures, new forms of gathering of people, and art releases its social potential."¹⁷

The impulse to change, transform a current order appears as a pure idea to exist in the minds of recipients, and next to force them to a particular action. In this context it is worth to mention the project by Paweł Kowzan, *Reaction to the dullness of day*, carried out between 2005–2008 in Wrocław, which consisted in planting flowers on the city lawns, which made the urban greenery administrators plant the flowerbeds; or the *Effect of freshness*, carried out in Racibórz within the framework of the "3rd Festival of Arts – Body. Spirit. City" (ill. 6), where covering an unkempt facade of a tenement in the city center with whitening turned out to be a factor unifying the local community and the wall itself became a touristic attraction, a work of art in public space. Since 2003 for some time Kowzan would place labels encouraging to sit on the grass on Wrocław's lawns, which was then illegal; as a result of this action the local authorities realized that

¹⁵ Gorczyca (2000: 98–99).

¹⁶ Rumas (1998).

¹⁷ Szreder (2008: 42–51).

III. 2.
Peter Fuss, *For the laugh of God*,
2007, courtesy of the artist



III. 3.
Peter Fuss, *Who the fuck is Larry Gagosian*, billboard, 2010, courtesy of the artist



III. 4.
Rober Rumas, *Hot Water Bottles x 8*, Gdańsk, 1994, courtesy of the artist



the regulation is absurd and opposes the openness of the public space.

Street art is a term containing the traditional graffiti, but is also often used to tell the artistic practices in public space from vandalism. Paweł Kowzan also works with a form of street art and more than once he has already had problems with law, resulting from a vague status of his practices. However, it turns out that what has already been described as art, recognized by the circles and the audiences, has an astonishing power to withdraw a charge of vandalism or an action against the law. The more so because everything that Kowzan does is inconstant, the material foundations of his works are merely ephemeras, props that serve the performer as carriers of contents. The content itself if not predetermined or predictable either. The artist sometimes plays with the schemes of the art world, referring to history with which he enters in a creative dialogue. This is why during the Fifth Young Triennial in Orońsko (2005) he decided not to show anything, this way referring to the works of conceptualists and emphasizing the character of the place and event, at which meetings with artists take place and the Academy professors are engaged in scientific disputes. You could call it a mockery, but one ought to look into the context and acknowledge that it is an action that most radically presents the syndrome of contemporaneity – the process of disappearing of the material art for the benefit of the word, preserved in human memory, a medium all the more insecure and treacherous.

'Art of Creating a New Kind of Cool'¹⁸

It seems clear that Kowzan as well as many street artists fights for the liberation of public space through transmedial illegal actions, for which they are often called urban hackers. Those artists (pranksters, in fact) practice an art which is not disposed just to create a space for art on the street, nor to staging the life, but rather to annex the fragment of public space for their own goals and on their own rights. It is worth mentioning the group Graffiti Research Lab founded by James Powderly and Evan Roth and one of their actions, *Make Throwies Not Bombs*. They created a small and catchy medium for the city tricksters: they equipped colorful LED diodes with batteries and magnets and then they organ-

ized a cycle of actions in New York based on putting those 'throwies' in several places, for example, on the Tony Rosenthal's sculpture, Astor Cube. As Evan Roth says in the interview for Monica Ponzini: "Our longstanding mission statement is that we develop open source tools for artists and pranksters and protesters and I think that still remains true. In general I think we kind of come back to this idea of sort of leveling some sort of communication playing field between the voice that certain groups have in the city – like, advertisers have a very large scale voice, like in any big city of the world. We don't work for them, we kind of work on the opposite side. They already have this very big public presence and we sort of see our mission as giving us and our friends and people who don't have the means to buy billboard space – how do we give their messages the same scale, we live here, there should be our messages up there, not theirs."¹⁹

A similar strategy of introducing decontextualized objects into the civic space is explored by many other artists, not necessarily to create a specific social (or anti-social) impact but also to recreate our way of perceiving the city area. One of those artists is William Lamson, unique among this group in that he was an accomplished photographer who produced finely composed portraits and landscapes in the social-humanist tradition before deciding to spend more time in front of the camera than behind it. Crediting Roman Signer's 'action sculptures' as a catalyst, Lamson now works in sculpture, video, and performance, as well as photography. His performance-inspired photo-series, *Intervention* (2007–2008) could be described as documents of temporary urban earthworks (ill. 7). As if to convince us that the world is full of these lesser epiphanies if we would only open our eyes to see them, Lamson's simple and direct photographs allow us to imagine stumbling upon random poetic collisions of materials, such as a helium-filled balloon strategically placed to blind a surveillance camera; a ladder made of twine and bananas, scaling a tree; a discarded mattress pinched into a bald tire like an elderly man squeezing into his old military uniform.

¹⁸ Lasn (2009).

¹⁹ Ponzini (2011).

BRAK ILUSTRACJI NA CD

III. 5. Rober Rumas, *City Manoeuvres, Attention, oath!*, Vilnius, 2004. The sign was installed in front of the presidential palace in Vilnius during the term of Rolandas Paksas, who was accused of corruption; courtesy of the artist

III. 6. Paweł Kowzan, *Freshness effect*, curator Marcin Krasny, 3rd Festival of Arts – Body. Soul. City, Racibórz 2008, courtesy of the artist

III. 7. William Lamson, *Intervention (Balloon Ivy)*, 2008, courtesy of the artist

Art of jesters as a form of anti-modernist public space paradigm

All mentioned pranksters and tricksters explore in different ways the possibilities of creating a dialogue with the urban space and focusing on some social/artistic problems using strictly artistic methods, as well as some commercial practices. Re-using the incredible success of commercial rhetoric they try to infect contemporary culture and art world. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that the most relevant feature of those actions which we can place somewhere 'between', between art and hacking, in a transmedial space, is the role of humour. Referring to the doctoral thesis by Sven Woodsite: "Humour can disarm and this disarmament can be interpreted in several different ways. Humour can disarm seriousness, problems, and differences people may have in society. The idea of disarming via humour, explained in general literature as a function of humour, deals more with the disarmament of a taboo. Jammers in disarming seriousness, problems or differences are dealing with subjects that others may see as taboo subjects. There are numerous taboos that are being dealt with, alternative subjects not frequently discussed openly in many (western) cultures. Topics such as sex, drugs, authority, foul language and death are but a few."²⁰

Consciously or not artists make use of the humour becoming tricksters and, in my opinion, the urban space gives them a great opportunity to exploit it in an even more direct way. Ewa Mikinia writes: "Modernism left us with a multiplicity of concepts, including radical architecturalization of life (architecture architorture, to use the term of Krzysztof Wodiczko), radical psychologization and individualization of the urban experience, or the transformation of the modernist experiment into the monuments of modernity, decorating the city and thus authenticating the liberalism of authorities. There were attempts of creating 'niches' of high culture in modernism too. Happening and street performance supposedly blurred the border between the 'official' and 'alternative' space, for a short moment breaking the structure of the former. Risking a simplification you can say that all, no matter how diverse, modernist proposals were joined by a common rule of psychologization and

aestheticization of the questions about freedom"²¹. Actions described in this essay show noticeably that this modernist paradigm of aestheticization of the public space is no longer authorized and that the art associated with the humor can play a very important role in the processes of social change and in the democratization of the art itself. The art which is based on creativity tends to be more than a communication, becoming something opposite to the media, a medium exploring the possibilities of media.

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²⁰ Woodsite (2001: 52).

²¹ Mikinia (1995: 238–245).

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Cecylia Malik's anarchic and mischievous actions, inspirations and related situations

While analysing the artistic activity of Cecylia Malik, it can be observed that a huge part of her creation is related to a non-anthropocentric aesthetics connected to ecological art and the problems of nature and culture dichotomies. Cecylia Malik is a graduate of the Faculty of Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, with a post-graduate degree in curating from the Jagiellonian University. She has won numerous awards for her works, which include *the 365 Trees* project, widely discussed during the conference *Trickster Strategies in the Artists' and Curatorial Practice* (Wrocław 2011). In 2010 she won the public vote as the Artist of the Year in the competition run by the Cracow edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In the following year Malik was engaged in *Modraszek Collective* (a *Modraszek* is the *Common Blue* butterfly) which was organized in order to protect one of the city's few remaining large, open green spaces – the Zakrzówek Landscape Park. This artistic and social action turned out to be successful and *Modraszek Collective* was nominated as the Event of the Year in „Kulturalne odloty” (Cultural departures) competition in Cracow. Her most recent project once again emphasizing problems of nature in the city, is drafting the dirty rivers of Cracow (ill. 1). The mischievous and rebellious artistic activity of Cecylia Malik presents a figure of a trickster from the female perspective.

Performances and happenings of Malik, as well as the situations accompanying them, are perfectly integrated into entirety of her artistic creation.

At the conference Cecylia Malik appeared in a colourful shirt, short skirt and with bruised and bloody knees (ill. 2). This effect was the result of the work of Justyna Koeke, the artist's sister who designed special pantyhose. A few of the conference's participants got tricked into believing there was real blood.

365 Trees action

365 Trees action lasted for a year, 365 days during which Cecylia climbed 365 trees, each time a different one (ills. 3–5). The project was a sort of diary of the artist. Each time she chose carefully an appropriate tree, background and context. In each one of the 365 photographs of the work, Cecylia Malik is wearing colourful clothes making her standing out from the environment and emphasising her femininity. The photographs subtitled *Cecylia on a tree* draw the viewer's attention to her, but as well to her surroundings. They show the absurdity of many situations of everyday life and can provoke various questions, for example: why are things like they are and why don't we change them? During the performances everything is subjected to the established



III. 1.
Cecylia Malik, The artist drafting a dirty river, photo: courtesy of the artist



III. 2.
Tights by Justyna Koeke on Cecylia Malik's legs. Nearby the artist's "coyote" dog, photo: courtesy of the artist

patterns: the traffic is taking place on the streets, the police is protecting the rights. However, as the artist shows, reality does not have to be exactly like this. From the perspective of a tree she seems to ask the questions: what is legal and what is not, who establishes these rules and do they really make sense?

Cecylia Malik in *the 365 Trees* action amazes the viewer through her consequence and breadth of vision. The photographs depicting *Cecylia on a tree* are taken in various places such as streets, housing complexes or cemeteries. The public was very often actively engaged in the action and, willingly or not, became the co-creators of the artistic events. The impulse for the artist's action was her favourite hero, a small boy named Cosimo, from

the novel *The Baron in the Trees* by Italo Calvino¹. The book is a story about love, rebellion and courage to be one's self. These themes inspired the artist who also wanted to rebel against established order and restrictions imposed by society. Cosimo was however, a boy and his rebellion is in line with accepted social mores. It is worth noticing however that a woman-rascal is not so well accepted by the established rules. Why rascals on a tree is more controversial than a rascal? Why is she strange? The language usage confirms this phenomenon - a rascal is in a way a natural sounding form, but we hesitate while saying rascals. The rascals Cecylia

¹ Calvino (1977).



III. 3. Cecylia Malik, Boxwood, 344th of 365 Trees, 03/09/2010, photo: courtesy of the artist

Malik, while highlighting her femininity, changes in unconventional way this pattern of thought. Rebellious and illegal attitudes are very often emphasised in her artistic creation. It happened, that during the actions the municipal policemen intervened and, in a way, they become parts of the artistic events causing various, sometimes amusing situation. The people reacted in various ways and their behaviours changed depending on place, time, and context. The photograph named *the 193 Tree* is particularly interesting - it presents the artist on a tree during the Emaus fair in Cracow. It turns out, that the reactions to the performance can at times be passionate, but sometimes can also be indifferent. The people presented on the photograph are preoccupied with their own amusements and do not pay any attention to the presence of the artist on the tree at all. Did they get used to provocations, or rather are they indifferent to what is happening around them?

The 344 Tree photograph from 365 Trees action can be treated as the illustration of the whole body



III. 4. Cecylia Malik, Acacia, 265th of 365 Trees, 17/06/2010, photo: courtesy of the artist



III. 5. Cecylia Malik, Elm, 193 th of 365 Trees, 05/04/2010, photo: courtesy of the artist

of work by the artist. What is more, it exemplifies at the same time the essence of trickster's strategies in whatever incarnation it may take. Owing to this photograph, apparently familiar parts of the reality become something else to the passers-by accustomed to the daily routine. Her legs are in colourful pantyhose sticking out of the bush, as if the artist has just "dived" into the boxwood. Each element of

the photo is important here, apparently the situation is strange, but after looking at the photo we envision this “topsy-turvy” point of view. The crucial message of the work suggests that established rules can be seen from a different perspective.

The multi-dimensional perspective of *365 Trees* cannot be overestimated. The action emphasises the importance of nature in everyday life, as Adam Wajrak, the journalist specializing in the subject of environmental issues states: “The project is not only artistic. It is also environmental, because it re-establishes our relations with the trees”. And without trees, there is no us – humans, because these plants produce life-sustaining oxygen, absorb pollution and produce essential antibacterial oils. Moreover, their presence, which has been proved in psychological research, reduces stress and improves well-being². This action can be labelled as ecological because of one more important reason. Ecology is the science involving the relations between humans with non-humans, living organisms and their natural surroundings. In the photographs the author illustrates not only trees, but also the whole range of interactions with nature-including people, architecture and city landscape. Owing to this activity the artist gives new life to some apparently uninteresting places.

Royal monument and butterflies calling attention to nature

The trees are the elements of the city Malik wanted to bring attention to while climbing them. Another characteristic elements of the city that can serve this purpose are the monuments. In this case it is not just any monument, but a national symbol and the tallest one in the city. This time even two women mounted the horse together with the king. They manifest in this way their opposition to the lack of female voices in making important political and social decisions. The monument climbing is another part of Malik’s action *Modraszek Collective* (ills. 6–7). This artistic initiative, like the previous one, also joins the nature-culture issues (it is significant, that one of its participants was holding the banner with the inscription *nature is culture*). Many people participated and were engaged in the action, as can be seen, many are wearing butterfly wings.

The impulse for the initiative was the article in the newspaper criticizing the idea of development at Zakrzówek - an area of the city of outstanding environmental and scenic value. The wings signify the park and the butterflies that inhabit it. The issue ended in the organization of a large-scale and, most importantly, effective action leading to the investor’s withdrawal. According to Cecylia Malik and other people the actions people can identify with have the biggest impact. Therefore, she does not participate in the actions regarding remote corners of the world, because as she explains “one is the most convincing (and effective) while engaging in the issues that are personally touching”. The photograph taken during the final day of the action at Zakrzówek presents the artist on a deep blue meadow speaking through the loud-speaker. Many people dressed as butterflies called the *Common Blue* butterflies are gathered on the meadow. All this scenery forms a beautiful visual image with a deep blue hue, a colour that is to be observed in nature on the wings of the *Common Blue* butterflies. Various media informed people regarding the plans of the investor, but it was only *Modraszek Collective* that, through the use of strong, visual image, turned out to be efficient. At this point one may question the multidimensionality of the art and the sense of categorization of artistic and social activities. Whereas, what is extremely important, the initiative discussed, although not purely ecological by definition through its artistic dimension turned out to be more effective than the ecologists’ protests.

Nature from the female perspective

The problem of endangered nature in the city is one of the key issues in the artistic endeavors of Cecylia Malik. What is her attitude towards nature? Perhaps, as the inscription on the banner say - *nature is culture* and the artist wants to point out at this unity. At first she was drawn to the cultural aspect but the actions that she created resulted in her deep fascination with nature, while her artistic sensitivity allowed her to fully appreciate its values. In the contemporary world these two notions are interconnected, they influence and inform one another, each gaining on depth and interest. In *365 Trees* the artist draws attention to the importance of a tree in general as well as to each individual tree in particular.

In *Modraszek*, seeking to protect the green area of the Landscape Park, so important for the inhabitants of Cracow, she took the guise of a butterfly.

² Malik (2011).

³ Bonenberg (1997: 100).

The artist, while climbing a tree or dressed as a butterfly, builds an intimate relation between her and nature. In this way, she confirms her own, but also by extension, people's closeness to plants. The existence of the primordial bond between people and plants is a fact proven by scientists, but since it is against current anthropocentric vision of the world, the link is not really *enrooted* in people's mind. The predominant throughout the ages, until present times, has been a hierarchical vision of the natural world, but it is now claimed that nature is not beyond or in the opposition to the human space⁴. The fact that the artist cooperates with a living biological entity (a tree) - introduces to the art instability, velocity and variability (as opposed to the previous segmented categorized approach). These fluid features characterize the trickster's repertoire.

The initiatives of Malik can be associated with the ecofeminist philosophy and observing that throughout the ages female voice, similarly to that of nature, was dominated by man. As some of the artists of this current Cecylia identifies herself with nature not remaining its forceless part. She questions nature and culture dualism pointing out the continuum and not the dichotomies of life⁵. Surely, Cecylia Malik is not a radical feminist stating that women are closer to nature than men. Some ecofeminist theories oppose such dualistic and hierarchical way of thinking⁶. The threads leading to the non-anthropocentric aesthetic can be noticed in her creation. Since, what is extremely important, but many people tend to forget about, is the fact that without non-humans there is no humans⁷.

A trickster loves the public that follows its actions with bated breath. This characteristic features are related as well to the actions of Malik, because their crucial element is spontaneous and engaged reception by the public that is constantly surprised. A trickster is capricious, but owing to its acts moral values can shape the society. Even if its action is rebellious and is not only one dimensional, for example ecological, it can nevertheless point out at some problems better than moralistic and boring talk.

A rascal(ess) as an ambivalent figure, situating itself beyond the system makes us aware of the way it functions as well as its prejudices and values. The



III. 6. Cecylia Malik, Justyna Koeke, Modraszek Collective - Grunwald Monument, photo: courtesy of the artist



III. 7. Cecylia Malik, Modraszek Collective - final, photo: courtesy of the artist

characteristic feature of trickster is its constant mobility and surprise. One of the surprising actions of Malik is drafting the rivers of Cracow and disguising as a mermaid.

In the presented actions many people were engaged, including some members of the city council, which proves how influential and attractive the artists tricksters are in the everyday life of the society.

One of the secrets of Cecilia Malik's strategy is her intervention through strong, but at the same time simple visual image. The conclusion can be

⁴ Bohme (2008: 43).

⁵ Bureau (2008: 50).

⁶ Warren (1987: 3-20).

⁷ Bakke (2010: 324).

drawn that the role of memorable and attractive visual image in creating an impact on the society and questioning rigid standards cannot be overestimated.

Art from the perspective of a tree

Nature is one of oldest themes of art and constitutes an endless spring of inspiration for artists. Trees by themselves imbue people with great emotion and have inspired and continue to inspire many artists who convey the complex relationship of the person verses the world. In contemporary art the beginning of this "arborphilia" can be observed in the performances of Joseph Beuys during the years 1962–1974. For example *Documenta 7* was simultaneous both an artistic and ecological action. This action involved the planting of 7000 trees on an industrial area of Kassel in Germany⁸. According to Beuys, the world of nature suffers as a result of the inappropriate behavior of humans, even though nature deserves the utmost respect. It is worth mentioning that in Poland during the later half of the 1970's there was a similar action planned but never realized. The part of the action called *Lucim*, authored by Wiesław Smużny, had as its goal planting hundreds of poplar trees⁹. It is note worthy that two independent of each other artists were characterized by a similar vision if unifying people through the symbology of the tree. It is worth underlining that in both instances (as with the works of Cecylia Malik) the artists not only express certain elements of nature but to the whole human habitat, because it is very important to underline that people are an innate part of the whole ecosystem.

It is particularly interesting to cite examples of performance art related to trees. Giuseppe Penone portrays an empathic relationship to trees – through his own body he seeks authenticity and experiences nature. In a similar fashion Ana Mendieta merged the problems of feminism and nature like in the work *Tree of Life* in which the body of the artist, imitating the phenomenon of mimicry in nature is melted with the surface of a tree. It is the artist herself adjusting to the tree, and not vice versa, as often happens when the tree is completely subordinated to man and his over-used. These works are illustrative of issues related to the protection of nature.

This worldview expresses nature that is seen as not separate from human existence. It is worth quoting Jarosław Kozakiewicz, who notes that "if we realize that we are part of nature we treat it differently"¹⁰.

In the works presented the very presence of nature seems to be very significant. The creator then becomes one of the elements of nature and goes back to the sources that is to the trees, because he recalls a primary bond that exists between humans and trees. In this context, an interesting juxtaposition can be made, that of the photographs of Wanda Michalak and documentation of Cecylia Malik *365 trees*. Their duo exhibition called *Arborphilia – The love of trees* was presented in 2011 in Amsterdam. Through the works presented on this exhibition the fascination and respect they have for the trees can be read. However, both the artists slightly differ in a way of expression. While Malik in her colorful clothes stands out against a tree, the photos of Michalak show her naked, thus emphasizing that she is but a tiny element of the landscape.

The artists who make references to the tradition of art (recalling among others the antique architectural orders and the miniature painting) which is inextricably linked with nature and trees are Ian Hamilton Finlay and Linas Domarackas. In the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands Finlay enveloped the bases of several trees by the classical column bases. In this way the artist reminds us that the trees are the archetypes of architectural orders that represent cultural heritage of humanity. The work points to the origins of art and its inseparable relation to the natural world.

The wood as canvas is used from the earliest times. It is also used For this purpose by Linas Domarackas, in his case however, the canvas is a living tree, and its rough surface is an integral part of the images depicted on it. Domarackas paints his paintings in places where a branch was cut off or the bark fell off. Presented often in the site of injured trunk, images have their roots in the Orthodox iconography. It is important to mention that the paint used is not a "poison" for the trees, on the contrary, it is a protection, because the damage cause rotting of wood and after painting over, the bark is gradually renewed. Thus the project is both an eco-art artist statement and an action protecting trees in the park ecosystem in the Praga district in Warsaw.

⁸ Mazik (2010: 24–25).

⁹ Smużny (2012).

¹⁰ Rydiger (2011).

Some artists are willing to show the trees from the perspective of their materiality. Others, however, want to explore and re-read the metaphors associated with the trees from the dawn of time. Malik seems to choose yet another (inverted) point of view - the rebel campaign, in which the trees are privileged actors in the theater of the body acted out in nature. The role of the body as an integral part of nature is thus emphasized.

The figure of a tree in contemporary art is characterized by polysemy and ambiguity. In some cases, a tree becomes a tool for creating the identity of the artist. Often it is a catalyst for social, ethical and environmental discussion and fulfill in this way the educational function. When looking at the tree from the perspective of its materiality, it reveals the problem of both ephemerality and duration. First of all however, a tree as a living organism is a strong symbol of the connection between nature and culture. A tree plays a part of the creative role in interspecies projects in which responsibility is the key issue.

Art has always been created from a human perspective, but paradoxically, if it is created in accordance with the principle of responsibility, relationships and obligations arising from them, it can point as well to a different than anthropocentric perspective. Looking at the world (nature and culture), as Cecylia Malik and other artists do, from the perspective of the tree, thus having a broader point of view, allows us to change this deep-rooted vision of the world.

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Trickster and Gender

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Vulnerable masculinity in the works of young Polish artists

Young male artists more and more often explore the topic of masculinity.¹ However, as opposed to Polish critical artists (including Zbigniew Libera, Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski), they do not relate to practices of disciplining masculinity, or analyze social conventions of it, but they show masculinity as an area that is vulnerable.

In this text I would like to consider works of such young male artists, born in the 1980s, as: Paweł Matyszewski (born in 1984, graduated in 2009 at the University of Art – former the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań), Bartosz Kokosiński (born in 1984, graduated in 2009 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków), Tomek Rogaliński (born in 1987, who doesn't have formal art education) and Bartosz Buszkiewicz (born in 1988, student of art education at the University of Arts in Poznań and of Cultural Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań).

These artists show delicacy and intimacy, reveal themselves, their symbolic wounds and fears, and point to their social unfitness. Their work, also, should not be compared to the art of *Sick boys*²,

American male artists like Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy, who have deconstructed masculinity to assume an infantile position to mock the paternal law³. There is a focus put on homosexuality in the works of young artists, however these works are not typical examples of gay art that might be seen as an affirmation of homosexuality (as it is described by Paweł Leszkowicz in his book on gay art from Poland⁴). This art is rather a story about own self, full of melancholy and pain. In this text I would like to show in what way the deconstruction of masculine identity occurs in this art and what vulnerable masculinity showed by these artists is like.

Paweł Matyszewski: The tearing of the Subject

I would like to start with the artist who has already won several awards, took part in prestigious exhibitions (e.g. *Ars Homo Erotica* at the National Museum in Warsaw in 2010). His first individual exhibition took place in 2010, at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok. That year he also received the Silver Spur statuette during All-Poland Review of Young Painting *Promocje* [*Promotions*], organized

¹ I thank Anna Orzechowska-Barcz for her remarks on some English expressions.

² I use here a fragment of a title of Linda S. Kauffman's book: *Bad Girls and Sick Boys*. Kauffman (1998).

³ Foster (1996: 159).

⁴ Leszkowicz (2010).

by the Art Gallery in Legnica. In 2011 he received a nomination to 10th Geppert Competition *Co robi malarz?* [*What does a Painter do?*] in Wrocław. He is also a prize-winner of the second award at Bienial of Painting *Bielska Jesień* [*Bielsko's Autumn*] in 2011 in Bielsko-Biala.

Basic medium of Paweł Matyszewski's art is painting, but he creates objects from borderland of painting and other media as well. The phenomenon of his art lies in extraordinary approach to the image, whose effect is a *mélange* of genres and conventions. His paintings may be equally well related to photography as to handicraft; some of his works may deserve the denomination of objects rather than paintings in the traditional understanding. One might find protuberances and concavities on their surface, and sometimes a matter originating from an entirely different domain than the pictorial order (e.g. human hair). Thus, these images become uncannily haptic, they provoke one to be touched, stroked, though sometimes they also horrify or evoke revulsion. And yet they remain subtle, minimalist and virtually abstract. However they arouse emotions and preclude indifference. This stems from the fact that many of his canvases resemble human skin: with the tattoos, scars, injuries, bruises, the outlines of veinlets under the surface, with the epidermis worn away or degenerated. The story that the artist shows is a story which reflects itself directly on the skin, or which is inscribed on the body. The colour of the paintings is exceptional; invoking all that which is carnal (it seems that we actually deal with the human skin). There is something about this bodily verismo, which necessitates a reference to Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* (1985), where the protagonist, Jean Baptiste Grenouille, gifted with an absolute sense of smell, is possessed with the idea to render the scent of the female body. Here, the issue could be the exchange of canvas for human skin, or that brief moment of uncertainty, when Matyszewski's images seem to come from an order other than the pictorial one, where the difference between the painter's canvas and human skin is suspended.

In the history of painting, the surface of picture has been treated as corporeal (female) matter on a number of occasions, while the very act of painting was identified with creator's discharge of sexual energy and with taking the image into possession. The artists themselves would draw references to these sexual connotations. Towards the end of his

life, August Renoir, consumed with arthritis, when asked how it was possible that he still created paintings, was allegedly to answer: "I paint with my prick"⁵. Wassily Kandinsky describes the moment when he faced the plain canvas thus: "At first, it stands there like a pure chaste virgin... And then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist"⁶. Lynda Nead interprets these words as reduction of the painting practice to rape, the author also discusses the meaning of the artist, who treats canvas as naked until he has inscribed it, thereby rendering a sense of it. A similar thing took place in the art of abstract expressionists (including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell), who would make an expressive record of their energy on canvas. Their art was described using such notions as "manly", "strong", "decisive", "aggressive", it is no difficult to treat their art as a record of sexual energy, and to compare the characteristic splashes of Jackson Pollock's brush to orgasmic, outbursts of semen⁷. The nickname given to Pollock "Jack the Dripper" may also be ambiguously interpreted. In 1960, a French artist, Yves Klein began actions from the *Anthropometry of the Blue Epoch* series, in which not the penis is the brush, as with Renoir, but the very female body. The action put the concept of *femme pinceau* (a living female brush) into practice. Here, women were covered in blue paint, and then impressed the forms of their bodies on white paper hanging on the walls and strewn on the floor of the gallery. In all these examples we are dealing with validation of the male subject. The subject that is clearly defined, scornful of otherness and dominating, controls the image, carries out a transformation of the uncontrollable corporeal matter into an object of its artistic vision.

Something completely opposite happens with Paweł Matyszewski's art; it is the corporeal matter that holds sway over the artistic concept, it does not permit itself to be harnessed and subordinated, the subject does not exercise authority over the depiction, succumbing and disintegrating in the disordered matter of the real, which according to Lacan's theory does not yield itself to representation, constituting a negative of the order of the symbolic. The real is something most primary in the subject,

⁵ Nead (1992: 56).

⁶ Nead (1992: 101).

⁷ Leszkowicz (1999).

it appears before the order of symbolic. As Hal Foster shows in his *The Return of the Real*, the real has started to be a crucial for some contemporary artists. Some works refuse “the old-aged mandate to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real”⁸. Artists reject either Lacan’s screen, however it might provoke danger, because “the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light. Otherwise it would be impossible, for to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real”⁹. Nevertheless, some contemporary works “not only attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn”¹⁰. In this way artists dispel an illusion of the armed subject that is detached from the world and closed in its imposed, strict frames of identity.

Matyszewski’s paintings may be read as abjectual, because in spite of showing skin, and therefore a layer enveloping the human body, they simultaneously indicate the uncertainty of the boundaries, showing rents such as wounds or scars. Here, the skin is not an external shell, which protects the subject against threats coming from outside and from inside, against the disordered matter, against desire which is deemed inappropriate. All these bruises, veinlets, injuries found in these pictures imply vulnerability and fragility of the subject, the inability to define its boundaries. Tearing of the skin might be interpreted as tearing of the subject. Thus Matyszewski’s art might be described as traumatic illusionism, referring to Foster, in which there occurs a transposition from the reality construed as the effect of the representation to reality as a traumatic item, while the attention shifts from the image – screen to the object – gaze¹¹. With regard to such works, Foster writes that “It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition”¹².

The extraordinary self-portrait of the artist, also painted on a ground which resembles human skin, is additionally furnished with genuine hair. Some other works (*Kreacja problem* [*Creation of Problem*], 2009, *bez tytułu* [*Untitled*], 2008, *ill. 1*) depict contours of male figures, and additionally fur-



Ill. 1. Paweł Matyszewski, *Untitled*, 2008

nished with genuine hair as well. The central points of these paintings that attract the gaze are male genitalia, sometimes showed in erection. As Paweł Leszkowicz writes, “Matyszewski uses genuine hair in his works which outline male corporeality”¹³. He underlines the seductive aspect of the hair, however hair is also wild, untamed and not easy to control and it might even cause disgust (as at wash-basin’s strainer).

The carnality of these images attracts and repulses at the same time, the unusual patterns painted on the canvas/body fascinate, while one is appalled by a clearly marked injury, a degradation of a bodily tissue advanced to such a degree as to appear dead. Simultaneously, the artistic statement of Matyszewski’s is very personal, intimate. The images speak of hurts, anxieties, pain, but also of hope. The painting entitled *Agorafobia* [*Agoraphobia*], 2010 (*ill. 2*) reminds a fragment of a human body which has been severely beaten. The notion of agoraphobia, denoting the fear of the open, external space was employed not in the clinical, but social sense by Rosalyn Deutsche¹⁴. She indicated the practices which disallow the discourse of problems

⁸ Foster (1996: 140).

⁹ Foster (1996: 140).

¹⁰ Foster (1996: 141).

¹¹ Foster (1996: 146).

¹² Foster (1996: 140).

¹³ Leszkowicz (2010: 50–51).

¹⁴ Deutsche (1996).



Ill. 2.
Paweł Matyszewski, *Agoraphobia*, 2010

from groups which are marginalized in the public space, the ban on representation formulated with reference to minorities, sexual minorities included. Matyszewski's stories are told precisely from the standpoint of a person who discovers an inner inadequacy, a person who is not fully accepted and faces social rejection. In a subtle way, he introduces the theme of homosexual love (chiefly in the pictures resembling wall hangings), yet there is a plenty of understatements and mystery in his works. One might say that here, emotions and feelings hide beneath the skin.

Bartosz Kokosiński: distorting of the painting

Bartosz Kokosiński obtained a diploma of painting in 2009 in prof. Andrzej Bednarczyk's studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. He has already had some individual exhibitions, and took part in a group exhibitions and reviews of young art as *Promocje* [Promotions] in Art Gallery in Legnica, *Rybie Oko* [Fish Eye] in Slupsk, and *Geppert Competition* in Wrocław. The main topic of his art is the medium of painting, and especially the picture itself. The artist asks about relation between

art and reality, as in the cycle *Obrazy pożerające rzeczywistość* [*Pictures Devouring Reality*] (2010–2011). One of them *Obraz pożerający pejzaż* [*Pictures Devouring Landscape*] (2011, ill. 3) is an object – *assemblage* composed of curved and folded in half canvas, which consists of a great number of dead animals, birds and branches. It can be interpreted as a kind of still life, but with focus on death. It is interesting that an expression for “still life” in Polish language is “*martwa natura*”, which literally means “dead nature”. This dead nature is shown in Kokosiński's object. This accumulation jostles this picture from inside, is excessive and that is why it extracts from frames on the sides. There is a dead deer on the right side, and birds and small rodents on the left side.

Other work from this cycle – *Obraz pożerający scenę domową* [*Picture Devouring Home Scene*] is composed from the canvas shaped as a cylinder full of different home objects, as fragments of furniture, bed-covers, curtains, old telephone. Thus it seems that these pictures really devour reality. Kokosiński seems to ask: is still reality the base for art on the one hand, and on the other – does art represent reality or rather cover it? He is more interested in what is hidden and invisible rather than what is possible to



Ill. 3. Bartosz Kokosiński, *Pictures devouring landscape*, 2011

paint. One might say that art of Bartosz Kokosiński is kind of reworking of history of modern art that changed completely relation between art and reality, through rejecting representation of reality and replacing it with fragments of reality itself. Many avant-garde artists fought with a picture and asked about its properties, and reality came into art firstly in the area of picture (in case of cubist and dadaist collages). Finally a picture started to get away from a wall, and growing elements of reality resulted in a form of an *assemblage*, as in the works from the cycle *Merz* (especially *Merzbau*, including *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*) by Kurt Schwitters. This is a moment when the object and art of installation are born; the latter doesn't want to have absolutely anything in common with traditional painting. On the other hand pictures are still present in contemporary art and thus Kokosiński's tricky activities with picture force us to ask about the status of picture and its meanings. He makes very strange things with pictures – he bends them, he curves them, he reverses them and these bent forms are filled with peculiar things. In most of his objects, there is raw, reverse and bent canvas showed, but sometimes

there are blisters growing on it, and in other cases there are crushes and folds. In this way the artist tries to distort a picture, as he would like to show its interior: its skeleton and bowels and guts filling it. This creates a specific anatomy of painting and a picture starts to be a metonymy of body (or rather flesh). By the occasion of individual exhibition of artist in the Gallery BWA in Katowice *Niektóre obrazy nie chcą być namalowane* [*Some pictures do not want to be painted*] (8–31.07.2011), Marta Lisok wrote: “Bartosz Kokosiński's most recent paintings look as if something has just wriggled under their surface, stretching the canvas and disfiguring the frames with its shape and weight. The matter which the artist wanted to appropriate mounted resistance, flipping like a fish entangled in a net. Whatever it was, after this brief struggle the creature managed to wrestle out of the safe cocoon of the picture, leaving behind the sagging, rumpled canvas. Kokosiński seems to highlight the inherent weaknesses of painting: creative crises, mistakes, impossibility and deficiency”¹⁵.

¹⁵ Lisok (2011).

In this approach, the picture doesn't want to be the sign of the authority of an artist, it stops to be smooth and clean surface covered with paints in specific order. We are rather dealing with record of emotions, which are hidden under matted and creased surface of canvas. Pictures composed in this way start to be corporeal, as artist would like to show what is happening under their skin. He is also interested in issues of masculinity, what he showed directly in the cycle *Fit* from 2009. There are portraits of naked men, and focus is put on their defenselessness and vulnerability. These notions might be also relate to other pictures of Kokosiński, especially resembling skins as in the cycle *Skins* from 2010.

These works, similarly as Paweł Matyszewski's pictures, might bring to mind the issue of vulnerable body. Works of Kokosinski, as well as of Matyszewski, do not talk about proud and self-confident subject, they rather show its crack and connect it with emotions, delicacy, instability, thus something what is hidden under surface.

Tomek Rogaliński: masculinity as an object

Tomek Rogaliński creates sculptures, objects and sculptural installations. I have already pointed, that he does not have formal art education, he is a self-taught person. However, his works have been noticed and appreciated by art critics and have been presented in galleries. The artist has already had few individual exhibitions (in Scena Gallery in Koszalin among others). He also took part in exhibition *ZWIĘŻENIA. Namiętność istnienia* [*Animals' Confessions. Passion of Being*] in the Wozownia Art Gallery in Toruń in 2011.

Rogaliński's objects are focused on such topics as homosexuality, masculinity, adolescence, they also talk about defenselessness and vulnerability. The artist is sincere, as he would like to reveal his emotions and show them in his sculptures. Some of his works relate to brutal and painful incidents, as in the work untitled *Zgwałcony* [*Raped*] from 2008. Male body presented here stops to be an armour protecting subject against threats, emotions, outside and inside otherness and starts to be the opened body. Man is showed as a victim, his desire and drives are revealed, pain and harm are mixing with *jouissance*.

There are also representations of animals in Rogaliński's art, however, these animals are strange and injured, with guts extracting from their bodies; some of them have disgusting abscesses on the skin. And yet they seem to be defenseless, demanding for protection and care, that is why they are sometimes covered with linen or bed spreads (e.g. in rainbow colours). Some strange snails with seeping slime are appearing; skinny, abscessed, injured dogs are often presented as well.

In case of this artist, it is worth to show the area of his inspiration including such artists as Kiki Smith, Louise Bourgeois, Yayoi Kusama, Cindy Sherman and Polish artists: Alina Szapocznikow and Maria Pinińska-Bereś (direct recall to last one is seen in Rogaliński's work untitled *Feminista* [*Feminist-man*] depicting pink boxing gloves). Artist talks about his admiration for Frida Kahlo too. There is an interesting point that his admiration for female artists links with kind of nostalgia for femininity. It is revealed in a work untitled *Wstyd* [*Shame*] from 2009 (ill. 4), which is an object showing toes with red polished nails. However these toes are not female, but male; they are crooked, and yet they are cut off aslant. Again we deal with a fragmentary body, and this work might be compare with presentations of cutting legs by Robert Gober (e.g. *Untitled Leg*, 1989). Anna Markowska noticed eroticism of Gober's works, connecting with denudating a fragment of leg between the end of black sock and smart trousers. "The skin in real colour of body is naturalistic treated and even furnished with genuine hair, what intensifies the effect of amputation and causes disturbing and close in psychic sense combination of injury and arousal. The lack of her- oisisation causes that Gober's legs are more vulnerable and defenseless; damage and injury are more probable"¹⁶. The author notices, that these works break down with gender binary. Fetishisation and fragmentarisation of body is traditionally reserved for representations of female bodies, thus here we deal with subversion of gender¹⁷. Similar subversion takes place with Rogaliński's art. In case of *Wstyd* [*Shame*] the artist seems to show that he still has to cut off and censor a fragment of himself, he must not express completely his identity, he cannot be as he wants to be (what means in his case approval for attitudes and behavior traditionally labeled as femi-

¹⁶ Markowska (2010: 358).

¹⁷ Markowska (2010: 370), translation – IK



Ill. 4. Tomek Rogaliński, *Shame*, 2009

nine, which are still treat as inappropriate for men). Rogaliński's works talk about masculinity, however it is masculinity opened for feminine features.

Thus Rogaliński's works focus on crossing the borders: between genders, species, human and animals. We deal with looking for hybrids, ambiguous, insecure and disturbing human and not-human beings. In that way Rogaliński's art is close to posthumanism theories, displaying subject opened for his/her environment, found his/her own otherness and his/her similarities with other beings like animals¹⁸. Additionally, the subject is deprived of insulation and is revealing all that is inner, subcutaneous and flesh. That is why, Rogaliński objects may evoke disgust, similarly as discussed above Matyszewski's and Kokosiński's works.

Rogaliński seems to be fascinated with abjectual state meaning being neither subject, nor object, repulsion and disgust. According to Julia Kristeva, abject means pre-verbal state of human being and it denies division between inside and outside¹⁹. The

abject may be a state "before one is the former (before full separation from the mother) or after one is the latter (as a corpse given over to objecthood)"²⁰. What is the most important in constituting the subject plays in connection with uncertain borders between subject and object. Abject is something in-between, the ambiguous, it does not respect borders, positions and rules and it disturbs identity, system and order²¹. "Abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger"²². As Kristeva underlines the abject is connecting with establishing the subject that is not stabile and opened for own death: "I am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death"²³. Thus the abject causes disgust, fears and fascination at the same time. This is the fear of the Other, the fear of indeterminateness, of death,

¹⁸ Bakke (2010).

¹⁹ Kristeva (1982).

²⁰ Foster (1996: 149).

²¹ Kristeva (1982: 4).

²² Kristeva (1982: 9).

²³ Kristeva (1982: 3).

or of the part of our identity we are not aware of it. Hal Foster writes on Kristeva's conception: "the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body (again the privileged realm of the abject) and the paternal law"²⁴. Describing the abject, Kristeva makes us realize that our world is temporary, it is constantly threatened, at every moment it can be ruined and transformed into a world we do not want to think about and we are afraid to imagine. Paradoxically, although the abject inspires fear and dread it also evidences life, its power and the carnality of existence.

Hal Foster notices in his *The Return to the Real* that the theory of Kristeva is adequate to interpret some contemporary works: "Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, 'where meaning collapses'; hence its attraction for avant-garde artists who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society alike"²⁵. The works recalling the abject are associated with horror and are not easy to be seen. In case of Rogaliński, his works look like dead animals lying near motorways. This horror, with reference to Cindy Sherman works, is described by Foster: "the body turned inside out, the subject literally abjected, thrown out"²⁶. Inside turns out and outside turns in. There is a transgression not only toward the *informe* described by Bataille – a condition, "where significant forms dissolves because the fundamental distinction between figure and ground, self and other, is lost, but also toward the obscene, where the object gaze is presented as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen"²⁷.

Bartosz Buszkiewicz: injured masculinity

Last of presented young artists, Bartosz Buszkiewicz is an author of graphic works, that in combination with poetry by Kuba Wojtaszczyk, were presented during the exhibition *Naczynie [Vessel]* in High School of Humanities and Journalism in Poznań in 2011. Authors wrote about their project: "Some poems are metaphoric descriptions of pic-



Ill. 5. Bartosz Buszkiewicz, *Untitled*, 2010

tures. We would like to express not only by a text or a picture, but by combination of these techniques. That is why the *Vessel* is a combination of these disciplines. This visual essay is engaged, it might arouse different emotions, but yet it reveals homophobic spots seen outside the window"²⁸.

In this specific dialog of arts, they also talk about masculinity. They reveal areas of vulnerability and uncertainty, point at harms from childhood and homophobic rejection, tell about searching for own place in reality marking out strict frames of identity. Male bodies showed in Buszkiewicz's picture are not heroic, they are rather defenseless and fragile, they are sometimes depicted upside down and sometimes they are submerged in water. There is red paint at some graphics that might resemble blood and injuries. Only one protection that is presented here is other male body, equally defenseless and vulnerable (ill. 5).

All of these examples of art deal with the deconstruction of masculine identity. Presented artists completely break down with a traditional myth of a creator who is a master of painting, rule and con-

²⁴ Foster (1996: 153).

²⁵ Foster (1996: 153).

²⁶ Foster (1996: 149).

²⁷ Foster (1996: 149).

²⁸ *Naczynie* (2011).

trol it, and carries out the transformation of uncontrollable matter (of nature or female body) into an object of art. Something completely opposite takes place here. It is the corporeal matter that holds sway over the artistic concept, it doesn't permit itself to be harnessed and subordinated, the subject does not exercise authority over the depiction, succumbing and disintegrating in the disordered matter of the real which resists to symbolization. There are wounds and injuries revealed, cracks found in own "I". Abject that means fear of disintegration and defilement relates to own otherness that has to be repressed. In case of presented artists, they don't want to repress their otherness, but rather they aim to recognize it and in this way become familiar with it. Therefore the recognition of "own abject" seems to be a very important task and it might result in reconciliation of representation of self as "heterogeneous, divided and vulnerable", as Tomek Kitliński writes, in reference to the theory of Kristeva²⁹.

According to theory of Elisabeth Badinter, masculine identity is creating through a triple denial: a boy has to prove that he is not a woman, a child and a homosexual. Therefore, features described stereotypically as feminine such as sensitive and sensibility have to be neglected. A man described as tough should not be womanish and should score advantage over the others. His manhood is estimated with such notions as: success, authority and others' admiration for him. He should be stronger than others, self-confident, aggressive and capable of taking risk³⁰. Presented artists break down with all of these requirements, they show masculinity that is vulnerable, indeterminate, uncertain and opened for femininity. Therefore their works break down with traditional way of defining masculine identity. They also abandon representation of male body as an armour protecting subject against threats, emotions, outside and inside otherness. They rather show body as torn and opened and masculinity as uncertain and difficult to define. That is why; the masculinity showed in this art might be described as vulnerable.

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²⁹ Kitliński (2001).

³⁰ Badinter (1997).

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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The female trickster: on the artistic strategies of Natalia LL

In primeval mythologies, the Trickster was described as a complex, ambiguous and internally incoherent being, transmuting from what was shapeless and senseless to what was fully meaningful. His ability to transform and his nature synthesizing primeval stupidity and a specific form of intelligence made him both a *cultural hero* as well as a *buffoon* and a *deceiver*. This duality made the Trickster immortal, since, as it was claimed by Paul Radin, everyone saw in this mythical hero "the promise of differentiation, the promise of god and man" and, to refer to G. Jung's interpretation, a fully representative symbol of human awkwardness and finiteness.

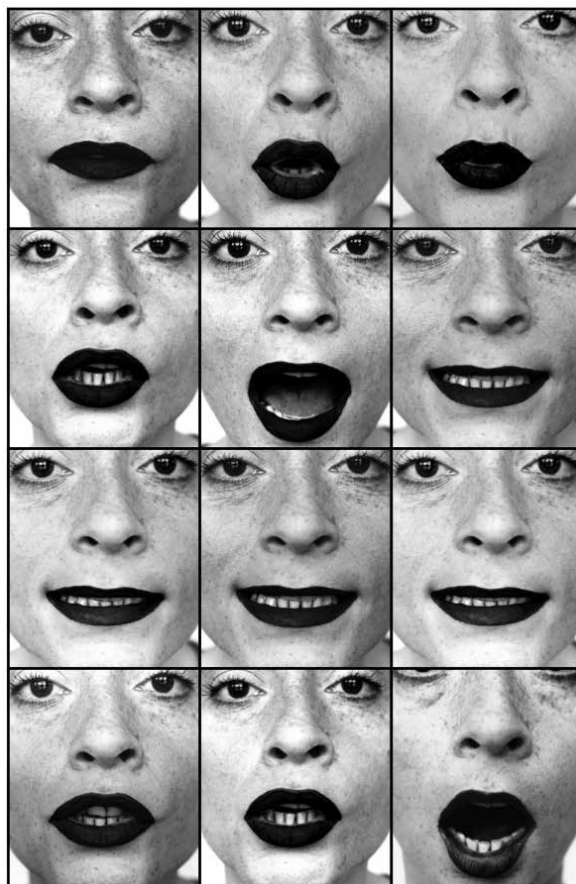
Derived from many different stories and appearing in various epochs and communities, the Trickster "became and remained everything to every man – god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer and creator". As an embodiment of fullness, he entices and seduces, providing us with numerous possibilities of describing what is primeval, dark, funny and incomprehensible in human nature, as well as with an opportunity to talk about what usually remains unexpressed and to confront ourselves with what is terrifying. In mythology, Trickster epitomizes the traits of masculine personality such as strength and power, he is also a chief,

a grandson and a wanderer, who strives, successfully or not, to satisfy his voracious hunger and unbridled sexuality. His clearly defined gender is not fixed once and for all, however, as the Trickster is capable of changing it, transforming from a male figure into a female one in order to marry and bear children as a 'woman'. This unusual ability to transform is always a reversible process and the reasons for Trickster's metamorphoses are as a rule: escape, ensuring favourable living conditions for himself or taking revenge on his enemies. Changing gender is therefore one of Trickster's tricks, his weapon, as well as a hideaway.

There are few myths in which Trickster is depicted as a woman, although, as Ricki Stefanie Tannen observes, "the Trickster in female form has been with us as long as archetypal energies have manifested on the temporal plane of human existence, but they were not called trickster". The stories about a female Trickster are usually less developed, though the female characters possess the same features that are characteristic of the original male figure. The scarcity of female Tricksters is attributed to the fact that the Trickster myth functioned in patriarchal cultures, dominated by men's worldviews, though paradoxically, in tribal communities in which a woman enjoyed high status, the Trickster was similarly a man.

In mythology, a female (unnamed) Trickster is usually a brave, witty and active woman endowed with wisdom and shrewdness, always conscious of her sexuality, e.g.: the Greek goddess Athena, the mythological Baubo or Iambe, the Japanese Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto and other heroines, who, through analogy with their male counterpart, could also possess demonic nature. These mythological characters' buffoonery and dodges resemble Trickster's tricks, petty cheats and his chaotic and accidental activities. In both cases, these are usually mild forms of deception, based on misleading and posing, "bringing the mind into a state of illusion, creating the state in which it is impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood". Intelligent evasion and deception of this kind was practised by Athena, although her behaviour cannot be unequivocally described as 'good'. Similarly to Radin, Eleazar Mielecinski perceives mythological Trickster figures as a synthesis of "comical and demonic qualities", which, he observes, simultaneously constitutes a universal feature of archaic folklore. Despite many similarities, the female Trickster long remained unnamed and contemporary researchers have very different viewpoints on this issue. Male scholars differentiate between the Trickster construed of as a cultural hero and women's tricks known from mythology and literature. Female researchers, on the other hand, demand that the title of Trickster should also apply to female characters, who usually act as helpful carers, crafty negotiators, or simply resourceful and independent women.

In this simplified description of the Trickster and its female embodiment, one can point to both similarities as well as significant differences. Unlike the mythological Trickster figure, i.e. an undeveloped being without clearly defined proportions, who is recognized by his ambivalent deeds permeated with humour and irony, the female variant has her 'own name', biography and performs specific functions. The female Trickster is the epitome of concreteness and stability and usually symbolizes the relationship and communication with the Other. Trickster, on the other hand, despite the apparent changes observable in his attitude, is a pre-human creature, only a prelude to a god or man, self-centred, preoccupied with his own needs of undergoing a metamorphosis and only partially concerned with helping others. Irrespective of (his or her) gender, the Trickster does undergo transformation: the male Trickster creates his divine



Ill. 1. Natalia LL, Word, 1971, courtesy of the artist

or demonic nature out of the pieces of his disorderly self, whereas, according to Lori Landay, the female Trickster changes from a passive into an active woman in the process of negotiating, or rather struggling for, her own position.

In what sense does the art and approach of Natalia LL continue the Trickster myth? Is it possible to situate the Polish artist in the stormy debate about the Trickster figure and his female counterparts? It is argued that these questions might be answered in the positive. Regardless of whether we are confronted with the next incarnation of the Trickster, or rather with the employment of comparable strategies, the Trickster discourse makes it possible to contemplate the art of Natalia LL on the margin of contemporary art theory, which she as a matter of fact eludes with a truly tricksterly shrewdness. Making use of the ethnographic and the feminist discourses, this paper will focus on the art of Natalia LL, pointing to the similarities between the Trickster Cycles characteristic of both genders and the strategies employed by Natalia LL (ill. 1).

Thus, on the one hand, we are confronted with a wanderer, who strives, successfully or not,

to satisfy his voracious hunger and unbridled sexuality, and who at the end of his journey transforms, thanks to the experience he has gained, into a different being with a new mental attitude and within a new environment. On the other hand, we are confronted with its female variant, which, as Ricki Stafanie Tannen notices, has taken over the features characteristic of all Tricksters, such as shrewdness and humour, but does no longer function as a shape-shifter in our subconsciousness. Instead, “she is a woman who refuses to be a victim of collective consciousness, which delimits a woman’s psyche, her bodily autonomy and physical strength” (feminist discourse). Unlike Trickster, Trickstar is above all characterized by concrete corporeality. The female Trickster is always present in her work, beginning with her own legend and biography.

Similarly to most female tricksters, Natalia LL also has her own legend and biography, and her image/corporeality remains, just as in the case of the Trickster, fluid and changeable. Her identity, on the other hand, is clearly delineated already in her early works from the late 60s (the 1969 series: *The Flowers of Evil, Intimate Sphere*) and named in *Transformation*, which work, it is argued here, is the manifestation of Natalia LL’s independent and creative attitude (Galeria Współczesna /Contemporary Art Gallery in Warsaw, 1971). The work in focus was a serigraphy consisting of business cards with the following information: „Natalia Lach-Lachowicz, an artist, a photographer” with the letters of her maiden name and her husband’s surname crossed out from the back one after another. What remained was the name itself, which acquired an almost metaphysical power to speak for itself in accordance with its Latin etymology, which denoted *a rebirth*. The artist herself expressed this in the following words: „I detached myself from my surname in order to create a new figure under the pseudonym of Natalia LL”, to then observe, „as there was a new Figure and the Pseudonym, i.e. a name, I had to find a new Face for her, a new Date of birth and a new Biography. I borrowed the Face from Ela M., my medium (...), the Date of birth from my brother Edward Lach (born 1943) whom I envied being a boy in my childhood. The works and artistic projects became the Biography, the Life-story”. In her subsequent works, *Consumer Art* (1972) and *Postconsumer Art* (1975), the artist made use of models, who replaced her, becoming her ‘new faces’. „The face of Ela M. was replaced with the

images of Anna D., Danuta N. and other persons, but the procedure itself remained significant and meaningful (...)”.

Replacing one bodily form with another, the strategy of hiding behind others’ bodies, concealing, splitting and dissolving the body is an invariable element of Natalia LL’s art. Just like Athena, adopting various bodily forms (the subsequent incarnations of the human spirit – Bataille), or the female characters of 20th century detective novels (incognito detectives), the artist frequently abandons her own bodily form, which allows her not only to transcend gender constraints but also those boundaries which are social, spiritual and concerned with the concreteness of place. Stefani Tannen observed that whenever we enter a new sphere (i.e. adopt another bodily form, which takes hold of us and at least partially transforms our consciousness, revealing its complexity) we enter the world of Trickster: fluid, contradictory, devoid of concrete meanings, in which all of the existing roles and regulations are senseless. Natalia LL repeatedly undergoes transformation, as if hoping to encounter the Other, time and again, in her self, which would ensure her a transition “to the sphere beyond the working of pure intellect”, which contains the promise of continuity and unity. No matter if instead of Natalia LL we are confronted with a dark witch, Brynhild, Lilith or a medicine woman, the disintegration of her personality paradoxically demonstrates the complexity and unity of her identity (ills. 2–4). Changing her bodily forms and experiencing the Other, Natalia LL begins her journey as Trickstar/Trickster. The travelling Trickster develops cognitive skills, gains consciousness and reflects upon himself. It is a process in which various elements in isolation may not necessarily be understandable, but the whole picture makes sense. It is a journey full of dangers and traps, some of which are set by the Trickster, and into some of which Trickster falls, though he omits others, making use of petty cheats and tricks of different sorts. Other important elements of this journey include humour and a critical distance to oneself. Through analogy, Natalia LL wanders between the world of ‘experienceable reality’ and ‘creative intuition’ and, just as the Trickster, triumphs or repeatedly experiences painful failures.

Despite this, however, the art of Natalia LL, just as the Trickster myth of the Winnebagos, is the manifestation of vitality, observable in the succes-



III.2. Natalia LL, Artificial photography, 1975, courtesy of the artist



III.3. Natalia LL, Brynhild I, 1993, courtesy of the artist



III.4. Natalia LL, Odin's raven, 2009, courtesy of the artist

sive turbulent events and episodes. In the original myth, they include the situations encountered by the Trickster-wanderer which help him to discover his own individuality and gain self-awareness, in the story of Scheherazade it is a tale lasting for one thousand and one nights, which in the end saves the story-teller and other women from death, as well as convinces the prince to change his attitude, and for female detectives of the 20th century these are the subsequent mysterious cases they manage to solve. Natalia LL creates her story alongside gaining life experiences, or rather alongside longing for the 'lost continuity' – hence her enthusiastic approach to the present, but also a journey into the future, or even further into the sphere of her own 'shadow', her constant crossing over and unrelenting desire. Similarly to the Trickster, Natalia LL is a wanderer constantly on the move and the subsequent stages of her journey are clearly marked in her art. They include various spaces and spheres (*Imaginary Space* 1973, *Allusive Space* 1995, *Intimate Sphere*, *Panicky Sphere* 1991) as well as the areas delineated by concrete time and place but occurring in the inner landscapes of the artist's dreams, thus being inaccessible to others.

The travelling Trickster is always hungry (which is the result of his craving to find out more about himself and the world and to become aware of his own passions and desires (which relates to one of the bodily forms adopted by Raven, resembling a female figure created in postmodernism). No matter which bodily form we're dealing with – a male/human or animal form – Trickster is obsessed with eating, which may be interpreted as the 'state/sense of emptiness', a sense of lack and inner incompleteness. In postmodernism, hunger is a metaphor, a *symbolic hunger*, a characteristic feature of female characters of the detective novel, according to Ricki Stefanie Tannen. Their hunger is the result of their willingness to integrate but at the same time underlines their distinctness and independence. Hunger/desire is part of life, an impulse which makes growth and development possible, and thus a fundamental issue for the female subject, who has long been deprived of the opportunities to develop and to be active beyond the private/domestic sphere.

A comparable 'greed' may be found in the art of Natalia LL, and her thirst for knowledge and a need to integrate with the outer and spiritual world is noticeable in many of her realizations. In Natalia LL's work, 'hunger' appears in many variants, although

it is always closely related with 'cognitive' aspects. Natalia LL's *mystery of absorbing* is an expression of her fascination with the world and eroticism and the complexity inherent in an attempt to describe it. She observed: "The head absorbs, feels, and expels, and our existence in time and reality depends upon our own choices (decisions). This principle demonstrates that there is no world without the world of individualities". Lips are not only for pleasure, but also serve an intermediary function, mediating between the outer and the inner world. As Natalia LL admitted, "I experienced the mystery of absorbing what was external with such a vividness that since 1972 my whole art has been concerned with a conceptual play with consumption. The obvious contrariness of consumer art was a sort of a mockery of the world of mature concreteness. Thus bananas in submissive and charming lips could be transformed by our perverse imagination into penises longing for caresses." "Consuming does not only become a metabolic process of absorbing, digesting and excreting, which is to an extent referred to in the Trickster myth, but is at the same time "a conscious and sophisticated play with signs and meanings (...)". In Natalia LL's art, consuming may thus be understood through the archetypical as well as the postmodern contexts". On the one hand, it is a desire to fill the void, and on the other, a subversive reference to the false desires generated and imposed by society.

Among the significant concepts of *Consumer Art* are humour and irony, which are also the key concepts in the context of the Trickster Cycle, as well as in the context of Trickstar. The "Trickster may become the victim of his/her own ignorance, being frequently ridiculed, and this laughter is the factor balancing the seriousness of the myth, as humour is the basis of transformation, allowing to view the world and 'the horror of human existence' in an alternative way". It makes it possible to combine what is paradoxical into a whole. In the Trickster myth, but also in the work of Natalia LL, humour also appears as a critical dimension and is directed at what is socially established. "Devouring, spitting out, but also grimacing her lips in pain or despair, she shows the fullness of a human being's biological convulsiveness, a desperate act of communion". Only through such a direct act can one achieve a sense of unity and commune with the collective consciousness.

Georges Bataille described man as an ecstatic being, who fully experiences his or her existence only in fear and ecstasy, and who communicates with another man only beyond the sphere of work in erotic experience, in collective laughter and collective fear. The art of Natalia LL is a journey, a search for 'continuity', the scream of an individual, who wants to actively absorb the mysteries of life, but also share her own thoughts with others. Thus Natalia LL's art, the Bataillean 'concept of the unity of the human spirit' and the Trickster figure meet and their meeting place is reason and pleasure. Tannen argues that "Trickster is an example of Eros using Logos – pleasure and thinking – as a way of being in the world that both appreciates the paradox and laughs in the face of that irresolvability". Thus if Paul Radin suggests that the Trickster figure should be perceived as "a human attempt to solve man's internal and external problems", according to most female researchers, 'Trickstar' would be 'a human attempt to solve man's internal and external problems in the context of gender'. Natalia LL might then be situated on the overlap of these two areas, highlighting the intermediary aspect of art, which emphasizes the primeval nature of existence and human contradictions with a meta-empirical force.

Natalia LL's art cannot be confined to the signs and experiences of the Cartesian order, and the repeatedly highlighted existential aspects are not merely limited to transforming beauty into ugliness, pleasure into suffering, and eroticism into a fear of death. In 1993, in his introduction to Natalia LL's catalogue, Grzegorz Sztabiński observed: "The excess of meanings, often mutually contradictory and exclusive, their personal nature, a critical distance and irony are the features co-existing in the series of paintings and installations of Natalia LL in the 80s. The artist combines in them what appears to be contradictory. She demonstrates that a thing or a situation is such and such and at the same time it is different. It might therefore be assumed that in the previous decade Natalia LL fulfilled the assumptions she had formulated in the mid-seventies, bringing together the elements from the world of objects and the world of ideas, which do not fit together and come apart, but at the same time mutually influence each other".

Natalia LL might be compared to the Trickster, who, according to Radin, at the end of his adventures becomes "a different being with a new mental attitude and within a new environment", but in

whom “[n]othing (...) has been created de novo. What is new has been attained either by the sloughing off and rearrangement of the old or, negatively, by the demonstration that certain types of behaviour inevitably bring about ridicule and humiliation and result in pain and suffering where they do not actually lead to death”. The art of Natalia LL, in accordance with the Bataillean theory of prohibition and transgression of erotic experience, comes into being in a continuing process of self-construction and only at the end of this process it reveals, just as in the original myth, the metamorphosis which has taken place.

Translation: Michał Borodo

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Beast in the claws of Europe: Aleka Polis' art

„Europe is not something to discover; Europe is a mission – something to be made, created, built. And it takes a lot of ingenuity, sense of purpose and hard labour to accomplish that mission. Perhaps a labour that never ends, a challenge always still to be met in full, a prospect forever outstanding.”

Zygmunt Bauman¹

One of the replies to the question about the future of Europe is the artistic vision of destroying the current, unfinished construction and laying new foundations in its place. Realization of this idea requires to take a look at the history from a reversed perspective, to go deep in its mirror image, to enter – by means of some trick – the mythic time, the sphere of the ‘primordial’ chaos, and to tell the untold, concealed and forbidden *Herstory* – its own version of the founding myth.

In her works, Aleka Polis makes an attempt to deconstruct the narration about the beginning of things and to regain the ‘ancient’ pattern of the feminine history. Her series of films *Wzorzec Herstorii* (The Pattern of Herstory), which includes *Hylogenia* (Hylogeny), *Tytanida* (Titaness), *Pustynna Triada* (Desert Triad), *Zmierzch bogów* (Twilight of the Gods), *Katharsis I* (Catharsis I)

and *Katharsis II* (Catharsis II, [ill. 1](#)), sets a horizon for the mythical cosmogony, where the end and the beginning meet within the cycle of life’s and death’s transformation. The artist considers this horizon to be the domain of chaos that is pervaded with uncertainty and ambivalence, just as in Jane Harrison’s view: “Chaos is a space between Earth and Heaven.”² In *Hylogenia* (Hylogeny), Ocean/Earth and Heaven are being sewn up at the horizon level, and thus a strip of ambivalence appears and links both of these spheres. The artist is just a mediator-trickster who, like Prometheus, carries the flame of creative transformation, unites opposites, and abolishes hierarchical divisions.

Earth is the leitmotif of the myth of the origin and sometimes is identified with the Great Mother that rules over life and death. As Harrison wrote, “the worship of Earth in a word comes before the worship of Heaven.”³ In the film *Pustynna Triada* (Desert Triad), Aleka Polis presents women ploughing sandy soil heaps – one of them draws a plough, the other one leads it, and the third one interprets Tarot. Cards reflect the cyclical nature of transformations and the resulting story corresponds with

¹ Bauman (2004: 2).

² Harrison (1989: 455).

³ Harrison (1989: 451).



Ill. 1. Aleka Polis, *The pattern of herstory: hylogeny, titaness, desert triad, catharsis*, a series of films, film stills, 2004–2010, photo: Aleka Polis



Ill. 2. Aleka Polis, *Trickster*, photograph, 2010, photo: Aleka Polis

the image of the Earth's 'body' being stimulated by the plough.

Karl Kerényi noticed that in the Greek mythology "the creator of a world is the poet. But this is creation only in an artistic sense."⁴ Poets (men) wrote about the Mother Earth only in first paragraphs of their narration and then refused to acknowledge her primacy in consecutive passages, where they recognized the supremacy of heavenly-masculine potency and activity. Thus masculine libido gained characteristics of invisible divinity that manifested itself in phallic forms or shapes of animals bonded up with phallus, while femininity, identified with Earth, became subordinated to masculine domination. Myths provide numerous

examples of the hierarchical order of sex and power. Monika Bakke pointed out in her book *Bio-transfiguracje* (Bio-transfigurations) that "mythical interspecies couples are usually characterized by two features: firstly, they are heterosexual, secondly, the animal partner is male. [...] Beast, animal, man, god [...] is a partner that embodies very clear characteristics of domination and power."⁵

Aleka Polis in the role of trickster enters the sphere of chaos, out of which she draws the world anew and creates a narration that is different than the previous ones. One of its key motifs is the myth of Europa, who is identified with Gaia-Earth. The artist presents, in her own version of this myth, the princess as playing the part of the vanquisher and killer of the ancient god Zeus and his bull-beast incarnation. Another example of this kind of assassination is the act of Judith, a biblical heroine who defeated the Assyrian leader Holofernes by using a trick. By beheading him, she saved Israelites that defended Bethulia, and this way she became the pattern of virtue and purity.

According to Ovid, Jupiter (Zeus) assumed the form of a white, gentle and trustworthy bull to abduct Europa, the daughter of Phoenician king Agenor. Europa did not expect any stratagem and even – as Ovid wrote – "dared to mount his back/ Her pet bull's back, unwitting whom she rode."⁶ The consequence of her abduction was that she broke off the bonds with her own environment and thus became dependent on her abductor. This myth has been inspiring poets and painters for ages, but almost all of its interpretations have a masculine authorship and neither refer to nor question its very foundations: abduction and rape.

In her project titled *Trickster*, Aleka Polis changes the roles and fates of the mythic heroes (ill. 2). She reverses power relations, forestalls the rape and avenges its intention. The artist undermines "the foundation of the European civilization" and announces the end of the authority of Olympic gods. Instead, she unleashes chthonian forces and divinities that are born of Earth – Titanesses and Titans.

The mythological fate of Europa resembles the lot of Kore/Persephone, who was abducted by Hades, for what her despairing mother Demeter made earth infertile, brought hunger on people, and showed them a mortal face. However, as a result of

⁴ Kerényi (1963: 33).

⁵ Bakke (2010: 121).

⁶ Ovid (1987: 50).

the agreement between the parents – Demeter and Zeus – earth started to yield again and the daughter could meet her mother. But at the time of leaving the 'bondage', Persephone was already a different person. She was encouraged to try a pomegranate fruit from the garden of Hades, and for that reason she became eternally bonded with the dominion of the underworld, where she had to come back every year to commemorate that 'primordial scene'. Roberto Calasso pointed out the similarity of both mythological occurrences (the abduction of Europa and the seizure of Kore) that show the process of creating an order based on sexual control of man over woman and on usurpation of the masculine potency to be the fertility principle and the creative force. Also Aleka Polis equates Europa and Persephone and presents herself in both roles simultaneously – with pomegranate fruits in her hands, triumphing over the bull's head.

The attempt to limit the divine and masculine authority was a truly Promethean gesture – it resulted from disagreement with violence legitimated by the power advantage and the ability to perform passion-fed bodily transformation. Bauman recalled that "Goethe described the European culture as *Promethean*."⁷ Europe was to owe its expansiveness to the "craftiness, cheek and courage" of Prometheus. Aleka Polis reveals a different, twin face of Prometheus-Europe that emerges from the backstage of history and daringly looks into the mirror of occurrences, being aware of its both humane and inhumane, divine and undivine condition – the face of "Necessity that is driven by three Moirai and Erinyes." The former are the goddesses of life and death of both human and gods, the latter are the goddesses of vengeance. Jan Kott in his analyses of *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus stressed this passage of the drama, in which the Titan confesses in his dialogue with the chorus that Zeus "also cannot escape destiny"⁸ – Necessity.

The offering of the bull's-Zeus' head symbolizes castration of his transformable organ, which also is a symbol of the treacherous reason. Decapitation reminds of the inevitable destiny. The artist dedicates vengeance to the victims of rape and violence – women charged and burned at the stake for sorcery, madness and heresy. She quotes names of these women in one of her works, *Zwierciadło pros-*

tych dusz (The Mirror of Simple Souls), where they make an infinite text that unfolds in two opposite directions as a mirror reflection. This text, like an indictment, becomes a background of images that are part of the *Trickster* project. One of these photos presents a bull's head reflected on a plinth's slab, a blood-stained double-headed axe, and a female-killer that wipes the sweat from her forehead; the other one depicts 'Europa-Persephone' with red pomegranates – one of the fruits is being victoriously tossed over the oblation's head that is dripping with blood.

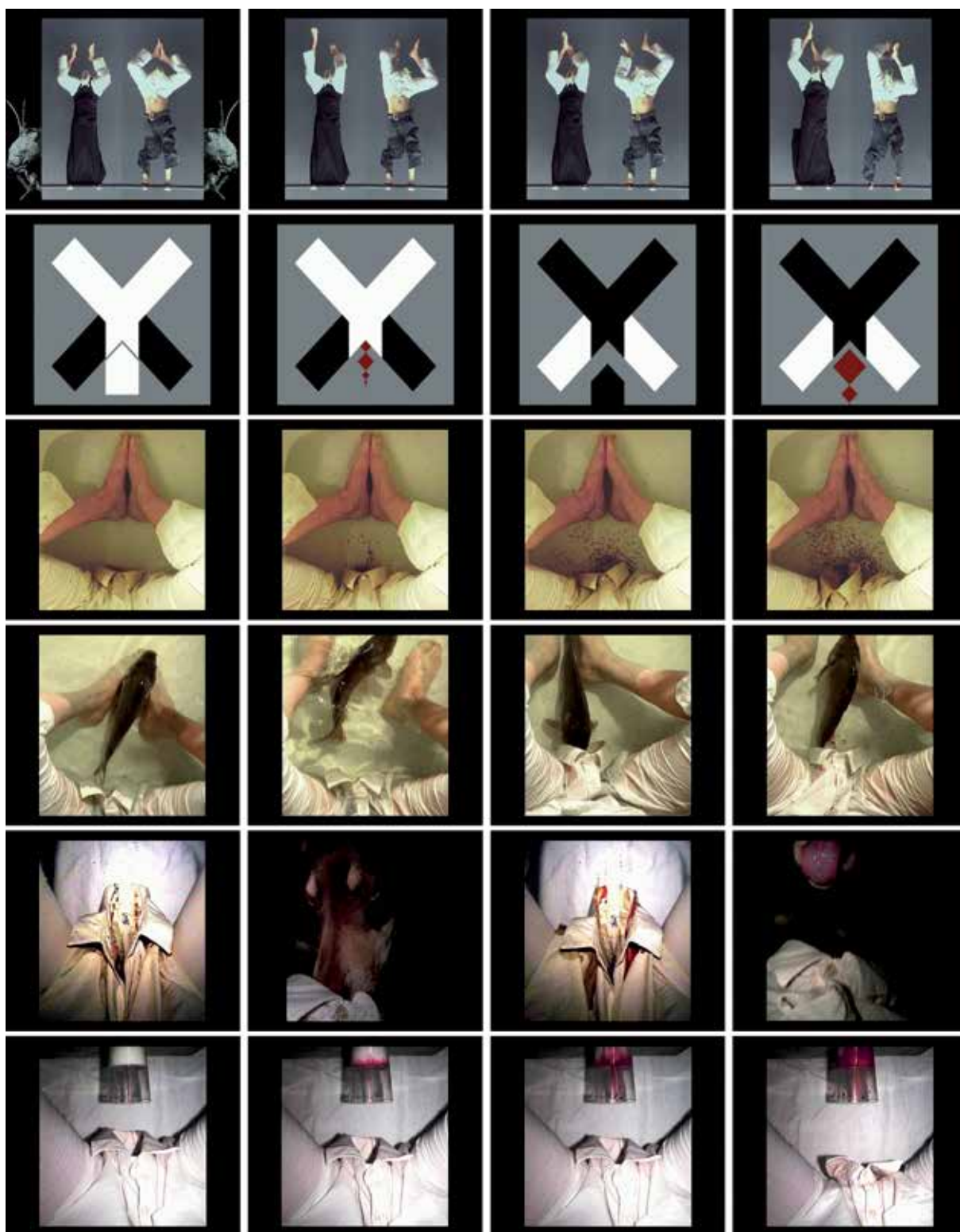
Two persons provide patronage for *Zwierciadło prostych dusz* (The mirror of simple souls) and for the 'attempt' on Zeus-bull. The first one is Judith, with Holofernes' head as her attribute – her deeds were described in the medieval moralizing books, the so-called *Speculum Virginum* (The mirror for virgins), in which she was held up as a model of humility and purity. The other one is Marguerite Porete, a Beguine, mystic and author of *Speculum simplicium animarum* (The mirror of simple souls) that included views which were incompatible with the Church's teachings and which diminished the role and importance of that institution. For that reason she was accused of heresy and burnt at the stake, together with her work, in 1310.

The mirror motif in the *Trickster* project manifests itself in doubled forms, as it is represented by two pomegranate fruits or two heads of the labrys, which had a representative function in the Minoan civilization (Crete) where it was used to give the sacrificial bull a blow. It has become customary to think that the material heritage of this culture, with manifold representations of a double-headed axe, hold traces of the matriarchal era or some other period when women were in a very strong position in the society. Nowadays, labrys is a lesbian symbol.

Crete was Zeus' birthplace, and that is where Europa was taken. Probably this island was the scene of the primordial 'rape' and the patriarchal coup, the sense of which germinated in secret transformation mysteries that were bond up with the worship of Demeter and Persephone. The birth of a phallic divinity in the finale of the mystery set the primacy of the masculine principle of fertility, which then found its expression in poetry and arts. Marta Ciechomska addressed in her article *Feminizm a patriarchalna rewolucja* (Feminism and the patriarchal revolution) this passage of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, in which the poet confronted two

⁷ Bauman (2004: 9).

⁸ Kott (1999: 26).



III. 3. Aleka Polis, *Bestiary of the subconscious: lamentations, transmutations, bestiary of the subconscious*, video and graphic animation, 2003-2004, photo: Aleka Polis.

narrations: matriarchal and patriarchal; the former was represented by the Muses from Pieris, the latter by the Muses from Helicon. This confrontation took the shape of a chorus competition, and the aesthetic form served as the criterion of truth. The contest was won by the eloquent Muses from

Helicon, who represented the poet and accused their rivals of betrayal and lying. The Muses from Pieris foretold Zeus' misfortune in his clash with the monster Typhon, who represented the pre-Olympic era; defeated, they could not finish to tell

their story, as they were affected by dumbness and turned into magpies.

Aleka Polis reconstructs the disrupted tale and performs anew the sacrificial mystery in the ambivalent space of chaos. She describes this space in her cycle *Bestiarium podświadomości* (The bestiary of subconscious, *ill.* 3), the title of which refers to medieval illustrated bestiaries that presented real and imaginary animals. *Bestiarium...* portrays various, anxiety-provoking and undefined forms: living trunks deprived of heads-phalluses, animals feeding on wounds, graphic signs resembling combinations of incessantly transforming X and Y chromosomes. What is more, also such points of reference as 'up' and 'down' are being questioned. Such created 'laboratory of sex' is the scene of continuous processes of separation, castration and joining.

In the *Trickster* project, the head cut off the bull's bulk symbolizes the defeat of Zeus and the revival of the terrestrial power of a chthonic divinity that raises its head with moon-shaped horns from under the snow-covered earth. The final stage of the 'mystery' arranged by the artist takes place on the edge of a forest, where two women felt asleep near a bonfire and an animal's skull. Above them dawns the Morning Star (Greek *eosphoros* – dawn-bringer), i.e. Venus that the ancient Romans called Lucifer – the light-bearer (*lux*: light, *ferre*: to bear).

It was the theft of fire that made Prometheus' (another light-bearer) name – for this deed he was punished by being chained to a rock, while a vulture or an eagle tore his repeatedly reviving liver. The stolen fire was carried in a fennel stalk that Sigmund Freud identified with penis, having taken two of its function into consideration: firstly, extinguishing (urinate-related), and secondly, stoking the fire of passion. The theft of fire enabled people to manage without the divine grace of lightning. Freud also interprets the hollowed out fennel stalk as a vagina, and thus attributes both sexes to Prometheus. In the ancient mythology, torch was an attribute of many deities: it was a tool that Erinyes used, Demeter went out looking for daughters with two torches in her hands, also Hekate, Artemis and Titaness Selene, all being lunar deities, were portrayed with torches. Aleka Polis presents in *Tytanida* (Titaness) a woman running through a peat bog and holding a blacked out electric bulb in her raised hand – an eminent symbol of the blown out torch and the announcement of the twilight of the gods to come. Kindling the torch requires repetition of

the Promethean gesture, an artistic trick that violates *sacrum*. Aleka Polis, as a Prometheus-trickster (in the antiquity portrayed in an artist-craftsman hood⁹), gives matches to the audience. She depicts on the matchbox a torch against a black background that symbolizes earth, and a five-pointed star, the Morning Star, against a blue background that symbolizes heaven; red letters of the word 'trickster' fasten the horizon – they symbolize the in-between sphere, chaos. Marzena Karwowska pointed out in her book *Symbole Apokalipsy. Studia z antropologii wyobraźni* (The symbols of Apocalypse. Studies on the anthropology of imagination) that "red functions in the culture as a fundamental colour that includes the whole – both life and death and their permanent alternation."¹⁰ These three colours – black, red and blue – became the leitmotif of the *Trickster* project. Apart from the matchbox and the 'mystery' images that show the bull head sacrifice, this projects includes also other graphic badges: one presenting the already described torch and star motif, one with a double-headed axe that resembles a tenon joining Earth and Heaven, and one depicting a sword and a scale – the attributes of Themis, the goddess of unbiased justice. This time Earth and Heaven are joined vertically, what suggests that feminine and masculine are equal. Aleka Polis does not intend to make a matriarchal coup, she wants to establish balance and fair distribution of rights instead.

Fire and torch, just like bull's head, are phallic symbols. According to Kerényi, "The phallus is Trickster's double and alter ego."¹¹ Aleka Polis used in her work *Idol Nadwiślański* (Vistula Idol, *ill.* 4) the phallic form in order to interpret the 2006 ban on photographing the prime minister in profile. She turned a wooden railing that resembled the politician – positioned 'en face', it showed the repressed, although hard-to-curb and doubled profile (of the prime minister/president). The statuette of the *Idol*, based on the free play of significances of the word 'profile', was placed by the artist in many places and contexts, and thus it created associations with a naughty pagan divinity.

Aleka Polis' another reference to phallism was the profanation action at the Saviour's Church that resulted in the film *O dildowatości moralności* (On

⁹ Kerényi (2000: 90).

¹⁰ Karwowska (2011: 98).

¹¹ Kerényi (1971: 182).



Ill. 4. Aleka Polis, *Vistula idol*, sculpture, photographs, 2008, photo: Aleka Polis.



Ill. 5. Aleka Polis, *On morality's dildooness*, film stills, 2011, photo: Aleka Polis

morality's dildooness, *ill. 5*). When Callasso was describing the deeds of Zeus, he drew a conclusion that “rape is the sign of divine oppression, of the durable ability of distant gods to take possession of minds and bodies of mortal people.”¹² Marriage-by-rape was in the centre of ancient mysteries, but it also manifested itself in an oblique and subtle form in the Christian vision of the Visitation of the Virgin by the Holy Spirit. It consolidated the primacy of phallic power that set the rules and used moral violence. Aleka Polis lightens ‘the rape tool’, which founds *sacrum*, by addressing its mirror, artificial, pleasure-bringing and imaginative form – dildo. So she arranged a marriage of three women in front of the high altar and contrasted the figure of Prometheus-Saviour (which provided patronage for the performance) with the figure of Christ-Saviour, and at the same time confronted the mythical feminine triad with the mystical Holy Trinity.

Carl Gustav Jung, in *On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure*, referred to medieval religious behaviours “based on memories of the ancient sat-

urnalia”, which revealed the trickster’s demonic traits, like “the unpredictable behaviour of the trickster, his senseless orgies of destruction and his self-imposed sufferings”, and reflected his “gradual development into a saviour and simultaneous humanization”. Jung stated that “it is just this transformation of the meaningless into the meaningful that reveals the trickster’s compensatory relation to the ‘saint.’”¹³ He quoted the description of the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ that took place at Notre Dame de Paris in 1198, with notes on “monstrosities”, “shameless deeds”, “lewd jokes and bloodshed”, and the account of the fifteenth-century ceremony at the Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome: “In the very midst of divine service with grotesque faces, disguised as women, lions and mummers, performed their dances, sang indecent songs in the choir, ate their greasy food from a corner of the altar near the priest celebrating mass.”¹⁴ Similar rituals can be observed today, e.g. in Buddhist Bhutan. During religious holidays and between canonical dances of monks, tricksters-clowns tell dirty jokes, wave wooden phalluses and even simulate group quasi-homosexual acts.

As Kerényi wrote, “Prometheus, the benefactor of mankind, lacks self-interest and playfulness.”¹⁵ Aleka Polis adds that Prometheus is neither a mocker nor a joker, even though his artistic interventions sometimes resemble fun and are not devoid of subtle humorous elements. Nevertheless, s/he is mainly an anarchist, rebel and subversive who seriously treats his/her own mission to reduce violence based on divine authority. For his/her own purposes, s/he uses fire that unites opposites – creation and destruction – and a mirror that reflects the hidden side of reality.

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¹³ Jung (1980: 256).

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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'Newman': A trickster in every sense of the word!

"With Abstract Expressionism
art historians are much less concerned
with gods of giggles than with
Giants of the Sublime"
Bernadette Newone¹.

Only as a *trickster* Newman violates the
complexity of the discipline.

Not only the work of one of most prominent representative of abstract expressionism, Barnett Newman, but also his grandiloquent style of speech and exaggerated physical appearance presented to public can be explored in terms of an ambivalent figure of *trickster* (ill. 1). Newman's abstract painting, full of visual paradoxes, perceived either as a sophisticated perceptual phenomenon or too simple to be considered an art, is strongly characterized by *trick-*

*stering*²; its reception, both by wider audience and narrow group of specialists, was and still is an issue. At first rejected by public, understood better by generations that followed Abstract Expressionism³, nowadays Newman's work does not tempt to divide art historians into its ardent proponents and fierce adversaries anymore, but rather provokes undiminished interest in criteria for its evaluation. On the occasion of his exhibition in 2002, Newman was recalled as 'an artist whose work continues to defy categories and elude labels more than fifty years af-

¹ Bernadette Newone said these words on the occasion of non-existent symposium devoted to the 'hagiographers' of the movement. Its participants were Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Irving Sandler (*The Triumph of American Painting*, 1970), William C. Seitz (*Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 1983) and others who contributed in establishing serious image of serious movement, so aptly and mockingly depicted by James Elkin's student under the form of mental map of art history, reproduced in his *Stories of Art* (2002: pl. 4).

² Informative example of how art history deals with Newman's work can be found in: Lewison (2002: 7): 'I have always found the painting of Barnett Newman difficult. Difficult to understand, difficult to empathize with, difficult to penetrate. I am not the first person to feel this. Newman's first two exhibitions at Betty Parsons' gallery in New York were greeted with coolness by his contemporaries, perhaps with incomprehension and incredulity. They did not quite know what to make of it, where he fitted in.'

³ Newman was one of the least understood of the Abstract Expressionists. Yves-Alain Bois records some divergences in the reception of his work, presenting artist as an intergenerational intermediary: 'In the last decade of his life – when Newman was, at least, enjoying a certain degree of fame brought about by sudden adulation of a younger generation of artists – he was prone to give interviews. (...) Newman had always been saddened, and was, in fact deeply hurt, by the lack of recognition (if not sheer scorn) he received from his peers. In his late interviews he was seizing the chance to set the record straight for younger, admiring ears.' See Ho (2002: 29).



Słaba jakość!!!

Ill. 1. Michael Auder, Barnett Newman, and Viva at Knoedler's, 1969 (digitally restored, 2000). Photographer unknown, courtesy of The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York

ter his painting were first exhibited in New York⁴, which even more convincingly, as I will argue, may apply to discipline's concern with his work in 2012.

Indeed, tracking ambiguities in Newman's *oeuvre* could be an endless task on art historical level alone. Whether interpretations exclude each other or do not necessarily contradict one another, they often point at the confusion over the increasing knowledge of the feelings of embarrassment or helplessness *Eve's* author evokes. In this respect one may find interesting Bernadette Newone's exploration of *trickster* category consisting in teasing certain academic sensibilities discernible in Newnian field studies and, at the same time, exaggerating intellectual characteristic of certain currents in contemporary art history that overstrain art at stake⁵. My quest for *subject matter*, a phrase often used by Abstract Expressionists, is a continuation of her line of thinking, beginning with the subjectivity of an art historian herself who, having a sense of *trickstering* nature of Newman's art in mind and alike artist, who during his career showed strong moralistic inclinations, attempts to avoid being labeled 'a dogmatist'.⁶

⁴ See Newman (2002: 11).

⁵ See Newone (2011: 13).

⁶ Newman contributed significantly to the rebirth of culture after the Second World War also as a moralist, who did not help people to understand what he had in his mind. He was particularly interested in the condition of moral judgment in reference to art and sought to create the philosophical platform, on which the question of artist's social commission and engagement in the historical moment could be lifted to

Such are the circumstances of presenting a criminal case directly related to the study of Newman's work. The Crime at stake is close to Lyotard's understanding of the sublime, a key concept for Newman, as it involves disrupting the forms of presentation of knowledge, compromising its realistic character, accumulated perspectives and 'split personality' syndrome, as I capture poststructuralist concept of authorship. Eventually, the victim of this Crime is a humble object of our art historical sublime – the obsession with improving academic standards and the pressure to complicate knowledge that pushes Markowska's term 'comedy of sublimation'⁷ to its radical, or rather ridiculed, extreme.

Who's afraid of *trickstering* 'Newman'?

As arbitrary as it may sound, I take a risky decision of letting a *trickster* into Newman's text, in whose consequence occurs 'Newman'. A synonymous of *trickster* figure is construed in the tangle of authorial, historical and theoretical discourses, presenting in a false mirror assumptions of modernist art inextricably linked with understanding the work, thought and silhouette of an artist, whose name was Barnett Newman. 'Is happening' of 'Newman' re-identifies the notions such as the sublime, au-

a higher ground. Indeed, Newman is classified as *trickster* as 'Tricksters map for some societies just how one 'ought' to act just as formal moralists inform members of a Western society about proper roles, but tricksters are not stuffed shirts in the bargain: indeed tricksters are comical if not marginal figures, and they represent sacred beings in some cultures, but not in others' Bierhorst (1987: 13); Newman's public appearances, like the one during famous conference at Woodstock, New York, in 1952, which discussion begins Richard Shiff essay (Shiff 2004:3) can be perceived according to Brian Street's remarks on the Zande trickster Ture tales that 'can be seen as moral examples re-affirming the rules of society; or rather they serve as a model for these rules, demonstrating what happens if the prescriptions laid down by society are not observed'. After Hyne Dory (1997: 6–7).

⁷ See Markowska (2010). The term Anna Markowska coined and titled with her book on American art can be understand as a parody of objective mechanisms of producing knowledge and establishing canons of interpretations. While she applies it to dismiss interpretative perspective based on subordinating modern art to the utopist project of modernity (dedicated to the future), I would like to point at its potential productivity in reference to the nowadays art history's self-absorption with herself. This attitude of radical self-criticism required from a discipline is represented, for instance, by Georges Didi-Huberman. With some reservations, of course, it can be referred to the problem of redefining the status of theory in modernist critical discourse as proposed by Yves-Alain Bois.



Ill. 2. *The history of art imagined as a landscape*. Redrawn by James Elkins, courtesy of James Elkins

thority, originality, authenticity and singularity⁸ in their role of displacing and disorganizing the field studies on Newman. This excessive *presence* takes a form of unstable figure of a discourse interrupting spectrum of works such diversely titled as *Abraham* (1949), *Galaxy* (1949), *The Wild* (1950), *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950/51) or *The Queen of the Night II* (1967) with inadequacy that comes out in the afterglow of the imperceptible ruthlessness of the revolution that Newman's mature work caused and swept modern perceptual field of the viewer.⁹ This very act of dismantling the modernistic idea of the self that Newman's work and attitude towards

art have been much involved in, readers may grasp swinging between two alternating extremes – Newman as a *trickster* and *trickstering* 'Newman'¹⁰, thus having an occasion to co-caricature the subjectivity in question and parody identity construction inscribed in my text.

However, the task of challenging Newman's famed authority and *status quo* of the ethical order and universalistic human values his artistic enterprise contributed to by a critical effect of a text is not the easy one. No doubt, heroic condition of his

⁸ In the chapter on Newman, 'Intrusions and manipulations. The problem of repetition in graphic of Barnett Newman and Andy Warhol', due to the emancipating purpose of her interpretation, Markowska once again refers to well known existential characteristic of Abstract Expressionists as generation that paid much attention to the uniqueness of their own existence, tragedy and loneliness. Markowska (2010: 126–136).

⁹ Yves-Alain Bois writes that 'he [Newman] was, in effect, radically transforming the mode of pictorial reception that had remained basically unchanged in the West Since the Renaissance'. See Ho (2002: 34).

¹⁰ It would be ignorant of me not to recall here the ambivalence of Mieke Bal's book on Caravaggio (Bal: 1999). Noticeable that 'Quoting Caravaggio', a first part of its title, has a double meaning. It may refer to the act of quoting the baroque artist, but also to his works quoting other works. It is exactly Bal's poststructural thinking on art that inspired me to make one step foreword and relate the idea of an author/artist as a reader's/viewer's projection, taken from his/her contemporary perspective, to the conception of *self-caricaturing* process of an academic text's author. Thus, including Bernadette Newone as the object of the caricature and irony, I believe of course, I deprive my perspective of scholarly naivety and academic backwardness.

contemporary 'imagined viewer'¹¹ has to be defined differently than simply in the opposition to the domain negotiated by a modern subject, whose popular emanation in art history is a white, heterosexual, male artist or art historian respectively. Absolutely, more sophisticated strategies have to be invented to succeed in totally new approach to Newman's work. The base for such approach would be an exclusive modern formula of painting's primordial experience this subject had founded and strived for maintaining intact. To be precise, the bedding for subverting this experience, especially in the case of Abstract Expressionism so viciously saturated with ideological claims of narrow group of identities¹², has to be provided by the very selection of its discursive records. I really think that what demands here authentication through theoretical underpinning is actually the act of deadly vandalism carried out by a subject comparably determined by a sense of own underestimation and raising its claims unceremoniously just like Barnett Newman did.

Celebrated 'Newman' may appear to you shapeless, if not disfigured while touching upon 'the Creative Act' performed by 'the Creative Man'; its heroic 'original' seemingly disturbed by activities disclosing literal conditions that gave life to the series of modern variations of the self. But what fascinates is Death herself paying the price for ceasing the performance of discursively reproduced male's sublimed intellect, not any longer forbidden to be bothered. Thus, the answer on the question posed in the subtitle of this part of my text is delivered by art historians still firmly 'fastened' to the idea

of writing about Newman's abstract art like there are no perspectives for its interpreting unless established in vicious circles of the followers of his authority or the power of other 'Giants' of the sublime. Just outside a modern paradigm there is only terror, horror and pain, one may deduce from their writings. If only this common, negative belief of all hardly breathing inhabitants of the branches of Alfred Barr's diagram (ill. 2) could be exploited creatively at the minimum! No longer these art historians can be treated seriously in their killing reserve.

Unzipping Knewman

As readers might have noticed mingling with this poststructuralist juggling, much of the inspiration for *trickstering* 'Newman' comes from the impact of serious intellectual superstructures specialists imposed on Newman's work. It was artist himself who started covering their misleading appearances with words of prophetic gravity, but others, who followed him, were not lukewarm and responded respectively for his calling for the meaningful abstract art.¹³ Maybe it is high time we looked at paintings that have led us to insanity with the irremovable presence of True Admirers.

Compositions at stake operate with rudimentary plastic means of color and shape, organized in vast fields interrupted by one or more vertical stripes. These so called 'zips' occupy special position in Newman's artistic strategy as they manifest particular solution of the informal treatment of painting's device, achieved by their nonadjacent co-existence with fields their adhere to. The undecided location of 'zips' corresponds to what Newman once said about the social meaning of his work: 'I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did to me, the feeling of its own totality, of his own separateness, and at the same time of his connection to others, who are also separate'.¹⁴ With these paintings, in other context upgraded by artist to the role of expressive carries of direct meaning, new hopes concerning abstract art were awakened, but with his words viewers expectations of high experience were increasingly twisted.

¹¹ This term refers to Charles Harrison's 'imagined other', who coined it to describe the model viewer of Newman's *Eve*. His author confronts the reconstruction of artist's intended 'imagined other' as 'someone who could look at the image without the nostalgic glasses of history' with his own proposition of a viewer looking at *Eve* with the eyes of a distanced lover. Harrison's interpretation follows, however, Newman's 'commandment' (my term referring to one of Newman's painting title and the strong Biblical inspiration present in his work) of a 'proper reading of his work', so that eventually the 'imagined other', the lover, represents modern subject transcending his own individuality and establishing his own idealized separateness in the face of *Eve*. See Harrison (2003); Newman (1948).

¹² See Joselit (2003: 18): 'In painting of the New York School, individualism was expressed through an array of distinctive visual styles. However, the particular type of individuality valued in this milieu was the heroic emotion and suffering of heterosexual white man who, during the 1940s and '50s, were unquestionably assumed to represent 'humanity' as a whole. (...) the particular form of identity which this mode of painting represented and enacted was severely limited'.

¹³ The latest example of a serious attempt to summarize the state of research on Newman from philosophical standpoint was presented by Łukasz Kiepuszewski in his text '*Błyskawiczne zamki* Banretta Newmana', in: Gliszczyński (2012: 87–94).

¹⁴ Interview with David Sylvester. See: O'Neil (1990: 257–258).

Lyotard, in turn, having noticed the principle of the communication structure in these works in their elimination of recognizable realm of reference, identified them with the massages, however this 'massage 'speaks' of nothing; it emanates from no one'¹⁵. Careful examination of French philosopher's thought in this context provokes even more controversial understanding of artist's work than his own, which is: closer to grotesque and banal. How about expressing the boundaries between the sublime and the ridicule in the terms of 'zippy'-slippery quality of Newman's work?

Art history's trouble with Newman is instructive. It shows that being present before his works, both burden with intellectual baggage and relieved by comments that may sound trivial or naive, means being between categories in the state of one's mind frames and bodily experience tenaciously stretched.¹⁶ However, remembering that author of *Cathedral* wanted his paintings to give his audience a 'sense of place' or 'a sense of (...) own reality'¹⁷, art history fails to see its own blind spot in this respect; it refuses, in other words, to appreciate the *event* in defiance of Knewmanian rhetoric; it rejects, for instance, the possibility of confronting with what he did through diversifying the exalted knowledge of an Erudite. I think it is because of side effects of taking up this risk, it is acting despite the requirements of education and moving on the verge of non-sense. The sense of freedom and anarchy in differentiating foundations of knowledge produced by violent masculine's subject I refer to may be compared to Newman's turn back at the European artistic tradition prior to his art, however it is not quite the same. Its purpose is very different, which is the transformation of a state of speechlessness with terror, muteness or 'ah's' and 'oh's'¹⁸

¹⁵ ...or 'the massage is the presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is, presence'. These quotations are taken from Lyotard's text 'Newman: The Instant'. See Benjamin (1989: 242).

¹⁶ Not irrelevantly to my subject, this sentence imitates Georges Didi-Huberman's style of writing. Precisely, I refer here to his text 'Before the Image, before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism', in: Fargo, Zwijnenberg (2003: 31–43).

¹⁷ Interview with Sylvester. See O'Neil (1990:257).

¹⁸ Lyotard is close to my perspective, when he points that the massage of Newman's work is '*Here I am*', '*I am yours*' or '*Be mine*' and thus somewhat removes pompous tone of the sublime from his interpretation; however his position in delivering a commentary to artist's work differs from mine in that he still seems to be very serious about the revolutionary meaning of his own interpretation. His argument for the simplicity in

documented by artist's work and translated from the language of the sublime-oriented academic conventions into the articulateness defined more by the indiscernibility between 'meaningful' and 'meaningless': the sublime as grotesque.

One-men-tricksters art of hysteria

With a shape-shifter *Onement I* (1948) for nine months mysteriously stripped hero stood at attention within his Creator's grasp. Long after they had spent some time together, the painting was introduced to the American postwar art world. Its publicity at first rejected uncompromising protagonist brought to life by Newman's ingenious brush, covered with paint and pain of delivery. Eager for sublimity, the painter did not hesitate to meditate aloud upon his work in terms of revelation, but the narcissistic relation between him and his creative outcome soon was overshadowed by the global issues this work could stand for. Contributing to the primordial characteristic of painting's experience, *Onement I*, Newman's forever only child, to whom he plotted his birthday card massage, marked the inconspicuous front line of modern artistic expression and particular awareness of a painting. From now on there was nothing underneath its surface that the viewer could have complete power and control over. The stingy pictorial 'costume' of *Onement I*, consisting of the unresolved relation of the figure and the ground, evoked the presence of someone unable to be possessed and incapable to possess. But soaking up with the blasts of baby's breath, art historian's babbling and eloquent nudity, patiently accepting rumbling of crowds visiting the museums exhibitions,¹⁹ one day *Onement I* unexpectedly bared it claws at the accidental victim. The unprecedented, open model of *meaningful* Newman proposed earned even more respect in professional circles, when on her gravestone, too unclear to read, such inscription was placed: 'In every sense of the word, Bernadette Newone entered the realm of *The*

above-mentioned justification of communication's structure in Newman's work will be useful for us: 'A canvas of Newman draws a contrast between stories and its plastic nudity. Everything is there – dimensions, colors, lines – but there are no allusions. So much so that it is a problem for commentator. What can I say that is not given? It is difficult to describe, but the description is as flat as paraphrase.'

¹⁹ For the discussion on sound effects in Newman's paintings compare Sarah K. Rich 'The Proper Name of Newman's Zip', in: Ho (2012:96–114).



Ill. 3. Bernadette Newone's study day at Fine Arts Library UT Texas

Creative Man. Her voice dispersed the aura of seriousness of the *void*, boldly penetrating the volume of extinguishing modes of writing.'

Crimes of the Sublime

This piece was written by art historian, Bernadette Newone, during her visit at the exhibition 'Abstract Expressionism New York: The Big Picture'²⁰, where in the heart of busy blockbuster atmosphere she was found dead on the floor, nearby *Onement I* (ill. 3). According to visitors who reported her death, the cause must have been her overdosed reaction on the work of Patriarch of Abstract Expressionism.²¹ Her decedent's death certificate precise it: sublimation

²⁰ Bernadette Newone († January 29, 2011) saw the exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (October 3, 2010 – April 25, 2011) during her study visit in New York, possible thanks to the grant received from The Kościuszko Foundation. Increasing interest in Abstract Expressionism more and more often led Newone to the conclusion of being no one really important in the field study of this Big Art. She developed this particular psychological research perspective with colossal success and, what turned out after her death, also with undisputed credibility.

²¹ On gender perspective applied to Newman and his work compare: Leja (1995: 556–581) and Gibson (1994: 245–270).

failure. The policeman noted that people around were not really resonating this remarkable, monologuing response of her, but somebody from the exhibition crowd quoted Barnett Newman 'Size doesn't count, it is scale that counts'²².

"I promised myself to commit this trivial offence!²³ I begin with approaching the painting to make sure if what I see is really THIS maroon field (Indian red) split by THIS orange vertical stripe (cadmium red light). The field has an uneven, relatively thin paint film; the orange stripe has a thick impasto and is painted onto and overlaps a piece of masking tape now I have an occasion to tear off and check what is underneath. A searing orange of painful interjection into the field of doleful color, somewhat intoxicating and self-igniting. It stands proud against the ground. I start scraping off the 'zip' with a dilapidated nail. I could walk on because I have scratched what I saw, but when I noticed I have not yet finished, I linger in the hope for the sublimation of my importunity! Underneath the tape I find the secret space all covered with letters 'Never in my life have I resembled 'zip' and how I enjoy your fitness I think you should quit! Barney'. Suddenly I feel like this command of 'Onement I' refers me back to myself and I become aware of its dark side. My neurotic tendency is now underpinned to the painting. Step back! Step forward! Nothing! A false start! A stage fright! Intoxication from narcotic inhalation and substances used to conserve paint. The sweet sublime breaking my arm and leg. I look at the object in front of me and it provokes a feeling of discomfort. Am I still looking in the mirror?"

²² Interview with Sylvester. See O'Neil (1990: 258).

²³ Compare with his sensitive interpretation: 'I am standing in front of *Onement I*. I see a maroon field (Indian red) split by an orange vertical stripe (cadmium red light). The field has an uneven, relatively thin paint film; the orange stripe has a thick impasto and is painted onto and overlaps a piece of masking tape. It is a searing orange, a somewhat painful interjection into a field of doleful color. It stands proud, a form against the ground, and in this it is almost, although not quite, unique in Newman's *oeuvre*. I look at the painting and stare into its blankness. I could walk on because I have seen all there is to see but I linger in the hope that it will reveal something more. As I continue to look I become aware of myself in the act of looking. The blankness and singularity of the image refer me back to myself. The vertical band reminds me of my own verticality and I begin to connect myself to the painting. I start to feel self-conscious and to sense my own presence in the room. I look at the object in front of me and it provokes a feeling of discomfort, as though I am looking in the mirror'. Lewison (2002: 21).

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Curatorial Performances

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Bucharest/New York

Curatorial performances. Looking for trickster curators in museums in Romania

In Romania, visual artists use trickster strategies more in their own work than in their curatorial practices in museums. The role of the artist employee in the museum is to make things *look good*, more in the aesthetic sense, in a formal way. But *good* in the sense of what is *appropriate* or *true* – here the artist has less input.

Galleries are the artists' place. Museums are first the researchers' place, specialists and experts in different disciplines – they decide on the development of the institution and the calendar. The artist, in most cases, doesn't contribute to the concept of the exhibition, he is only the designer. In the exhibition room he brings his *touch* to what is displayed, with his "connoisseur eye," changes some things here and there, brings harmony between elements and makes sure the meaning does not get lost.

A public or private gallery may host shows where the artists manifest as rascals, swindlers, jockeys, hooligans or tricksters. Galleries are platforms for free speech where curator and artist have the same goal and work together on the exhibition concept and design. Sometimes the curator and the performer / creator are both artists. Here the public expects unusual things. They know that the artists are different, therefore their vision can be strange, peculiar, and hard to understand- but it is exciting. Museums, on the other hand, being public places, prefer safe

topics, traditional tools/ techniques, and scientific interpretations that may be addressed to a large public. This public knows what to expect from museums, no unpleasant surprises. Museums don't bring, at least not on a large scale, issues and controversial debates about nationality, gender, ethnicity, politics, financial power, national resources, etc.

An artist can shout "The emperor is naked!" The museum will find in the storage room something to cover the emperor's body.

A museum, considering its mission, its public, and its position in the community, will avoid the risk of using trickster strategies, because it would need to adapt its mission, to risk losing its loyal public or to change the traditional position gained over many years in the community. Generally speaking, while there are many postmodern galleries in Romania, museums still function in the modern era. Very few have opened up towards postmodernism.

Maybe new studies about a new category of public today, about the "nanotechnology" generation of young people, will allow and provoke museums to test and use different educational techniques and methods, among them trickster strategies.

In this article I will show some examples of Romanian artists who, after 1989, used various trickster strategies in order to challenge Eastern and Western conventions, countries' stereotypes, people's biases;

artists who, before '89, had an established position in the Romanian art scene (without serving the regime, but acting in various subversive ways against it) and were active in national and international shows: Călin Dan, theoretician and artist; Josif Kiraly, pedagogue and artist; Dan Perjovschi, artist and graphic designer for a weekly newspaper; and Horia Bernea, artist interested in ethnography and anthropology. The subREAL group did photography, installations, performances and conceptual art, and, generally speaking, negotiates artistic identity through satire. Dan Perjovski travels the world with a marker in his bag and makes on-site interventions and leaves his drawings on the walls of galleries, public spaces and museums. The painter Horia Bernea developed and designed a national museum in Bucharest, questioning the aesthetics and the meanings of an art museum versus a folk art museum. By the very concept and content of their work, they act as their own curators, or work closely with an art curator.

I will refer again to these artists while examining the early days of the National Museum of Contemporary Art – MNAC.

On the international scene, artists' work as curators is more appreciated and therefore more visible. I am interested in artists like: Kara Walker, Fred Wilson, Christiane Hamacher, etc., who use trickster strategies to argue with postcolonial issues. They are invited by museums which consider themselves "safe places for unsafe ideas".

After 1990, new cultural institutions emerged in Romania, and after 2000 more private galleries – all of these wanting to operate and collaborate with artists also in curatorial matter. The SOROS Center is one of the institutions which allowed and asked artists to move independently from the frame they had acted in so far and find an international public. "In the '90's, on the local artistic scene, the Center initiated specific exhibition practices promoting the use of new technologies, video-installation art and performance aimed for synchronization with contemporary international exhibition practices. It can be concluded, therefore, that in general the Eastern European artist, in order to enter the international art scene, would adopt a dominant international vocabulary, exemplified by the North American contemporary exhibition practices"¹ – "words such as 'identity', 'subjectivity',

'stereotype' and 'critique' are part of an international language of critical representation".²

At the same time, museums were not ready to change their politics and vision from the inside. They also were not prepared to bring specialists from outside to reconsider their missions and collections and change their permanent exhibitions. (After 20 years, Romanian museums, generally speaking, haven't changed the meaning of their permanent exhibitions.)

subREAL group and Dan Perjovski

I have chosen to give examples of Romanian artists who, during the 1990's, were interested in international artistic practices and succeeded later to emerge on the American and Western European art scene and become international artists, who could address a "foreign" public also by using trickster strategies.

After 1990, at the Fine Art Institute in Bucharest (today National University of the Arts, UNA), new courses were offered. Josif Kiraly, Radu Igoszag and Călin Dan came to teach alternative courses of photography to students who wanted to take this class in their free time, with no credits or other obligations (photography was not part of the institute curricula). I was among the students who chose this course and I got to know their work and participate in conversations that challenged us, the students, even more than other courses. In 1994 (the year I graduated from the Institute), the Photo-Video department was founded and Josif Kiraly became, together with other artists, professor for many generations of students, as well as mentor outside the school called by now Academy of Fine Arts.

Right after the year 1989, these artists expressed publicly their feelings about the political and social change in their country: the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship. Călin Dan, Dan Mihalțianu and Josif Kiraly formed in 1990 the art group subREAL and started to produce conceptual installations.

The subREAL group "plays freely and ironically with traditional myths as well as with the communist regime myths."³ The artists integrate into their work the new technologies and "are responsible for the introduction of video art and

¹ Galliera (2005 :11).

² Sandomirskaja (2005).

³ Titu (2003: 9).

digital art in Romania.”⁴ In August 1990 subREAL created *East-West Avenue*, just a couple of months after the May 20, 1990 (supposedly) free elections. *East-West Avenue* refers to the avenue that leads to what used to be Ceaușescu palace, officially called Casa Poporului (People’s Palace). On each side of the avenue is a row of blocks of flats. The project contains 120 iron plates (aprox. A3) mounted on 120 stacks (aprox. 60 cm height). Each black plate had marked in white a name, an occupation and the words *Odihnească-se în pace* „Rest in peace”. The plates were visible walking or driving on the avenue. In the 1990’s the former workers at the construction of the palace placed small crosses in the spot where their colleagues died in work accidents – a traditional way to honor the person’s memory and pray for his soul, and remember the violent death (during the construction, 1984–1989, around 400 deaths were not publicised by the authorities).

The artists from subREAL laid with this art work (installation and video) the foundation for a new institution in the Ceaușescu building: the MNAC, considers Petra Kipphoff.⁵ “It is argued here that the artists attempted to make visible the clash between an official communist regime and the continuation of an unofficial or actual persistence of an almost identical post-communist regime. The recent past was still a powerful presence in early nineties Romania, and subREAL recalled it through the 120 plaques seen as little shrines remembering some of those who lost their lives under the Ceaușescu dictatorship.”⁶ “In their work the artists also referred to the inscribed plaques lined up along the path leading toward the communist palace as both a reminder and a warning of still strong socialist remnants. Thus, the genus of the satire in *East-West Avenue* was identified by the socio-political crossroads of early nineties Romania, where one direction points towards the recent communist past and the other toward a Western-influenced regime. The impetus and what created the satirical tension in this work lied in subREAL’s intention to leave the conflict of the two world views unresolved.”⁷

Other installations from the ‘90s are: *Alimentara* (Food Store), *Draculaland* and *Castelul din Carpați* (The Carpathian Castle, *ill. 1*), where with



Ill. 1. subREAL, *Castelul din Carpați* (The Carpathian Castle), installation, Bucharest, 1994–2012

irony and aggression the artists show the physical objects of a social life obsessed by scarcity and ready to offer its traditions for consumption, and make references to European myths.⁸ *Alimentara*, filmed installation: symbol of poverty, represented a pyramid of cans with pickles or red beets, always present in the almost empty food stores (no fresh food). *Draculaland*: represented a table with greasy *mici* (sausages) and toothpicks, symbol of traditional food and reference to stereotypical Dracula images with flesh on stakes. *Castelul din Carpați*: a photo of the model of the Ceaușescu palace/ castle made from cigarette packages called Carpați, the most popular and cheap Romanian cigarettes, having a chair hanging over it, with legs in the shape of stakes, pointing aggressively down towards the Castle – ironically juxtaposing old and new history.

They are all political protests that for me and people who lived during the Communist regime could make reference to the domestic life, to aesthetics, to public and private places.

The video artwork from 1993 called *Transitland* is described like this: “An old bus is driving

⁴ Titu (2003: 139).

⁵ Kipphoff (2004).

⁶ Galliera (2005: 38).

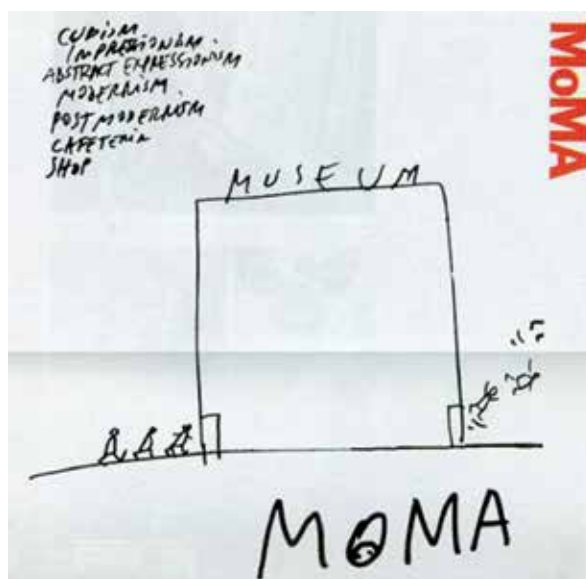
⁷ Galliera (2005: 39).

⁸ Titu (2003: 104).

through the night, Coca Cola ads are glued on dilapidated facades, people are relentlessly chewing gum, gypsy kids are dancing for the camera, shop windows shine with suspicious foods from the Communist period, while people are arguing around Ceaușescu's grave. From time to time, text inserts are feeding obscure information in Latin about the infamous prince Dracula, the Wallachia ruler who for centuries kept the European psyche alert. All those disparate images are depicting a generic country, where the phantoms of a dire past are still hunting the present. Both self-deprecating and critical of the Western imagination thirsty for kitsch horror and fake blood, this video is part of a larger body of tactical events meant to bring a twist of humor to the stiff perception of Romania in a Post-Wall world."⁹

In 2007 at MOMA in New York Dan Perjovschi gave a talk as part of his show *What Happened to US?* (ills. 2–4).

I was in the audience and listening to a biography I partially knew, having been colleague with his wife at the Art Institute in Bucharest. I will mention here one episode from his interesting career that he related, an episode that happened in the '80s, if I remember well. The couple Lia and Dan Perjovschi (then living in Sibiu, their home town in Transylvania) wrapped in brown paper all the furniture in their apartment. Somehow the *militia* was informed and at one point the couple was visited by some militia men, who looked around and apparently found nothing suspicious, because they left without fining them. There were no consequences for the young family, who was not considered dangerous for society, but maybe a little crazy. I didn't see any images with that display, but I imagine a house without a place to sit, with no objects to look at, without decorations, with no colors – an opposite image of a place where people want to live. Myself having lived in a communist apartment block, I understood their attitude as a protest against the lifestyle imposed by the standards of these constructions and imposed by the restricted market offer. I interpreted it as a visually artistic attitude against uniformisation (same kind of living space in apartment blocks), ugliness (disregard for high quality materials and craft), serialization (same decorative objects found in many houses over the



Ill. 2. Dan Perjovschi, *What happened to US*, drawing, MOMA, New York, 2007

whole country) – in other words, against alienation from human spirit and taste, and representing the repressed desire to be unique and creative.

This was among the first trickster strategies the artist developed as part of his artistic process, together with his wife, also an artist.

Dan Perjovschi was born in 1961, and lives and works in Bucharest. He works with images and text; he comments on the social and cultural political status of the country and of the whole world with humor, subversiveness and incisive irony. With drawings he creates objects, performances, and installations and addresses the public at large. Since the Revolution in 1989, trickster strategies have been eagerly used in revealing power relations in post-communism. Dan Perjovschi was able to go out in the street and draw symbols and parables on walls and give artistic education to everybody: in small unknown spaces and popular central spaces.

Today the artist works also for an independent review of political analysis and cultural news called '22'. This suggests that for him the role of an artist in the post-communist era is eminently political. "The artist's responsibility that is seen in every theme and every place he works is already a cultural political decision. He wants to reform the system, to demolish regulations, and he achieves his goal, transforming the world lucidly."¹⁰ After 2000 Per-

⁹ <http://transitland.eu/video/&videoID=91>, viewed on 22 November 2011.

¹⁰ Mihuleț (2010).

III. 3.

Dan Perjovschi, *What happened to US*, view from the exhibition with the artist's intervention, MOMA, New York, 2007



III. 4.

Dan Perjovschi, *What happened to US*, view from the exhibition with the artist's intervention, MOMA, New York, 2007



jovschi started to make his drawings spontaneously in museum spaces in the Western world, in spaces that have a strong position in the museum and business world and can afford to show controversial issues, like global warming, oil industry and racial controversies.

At MOMA he was invited to do site-specific wall drawings. The walls covered with drawings became an art object in the museum's room and before this the very act of drawing became a performance: the artist drew on the wall during public hours, two weeks before the official opening, allowing visitors

to observe the creation of the work. The theme was his response to current events announced publicly in the international and national media: global warming, military interventions, friendship, urban concentration, and the isolation of the individual.

"I went to check out the Richard Serra sculpture exhibit at MOMA the other day, and what to my wondering eyes should appear? An amazing exhibit of line illustrations on a giant wall on the second floor, drawn by Dan Perjovschi. Titled *What Happened to Us?* the exhibit explores ideas like US Imperialism, the misuse of credit cards,

artist-museum relationships, privacy and security, capitalism, and I was glad to see, global warming. Caught in a funny way, all these illustrations made you chuckle a bit, and got you to think, too.”¹¹ In an interview Starre Vartan made with the artist he affirms “the drawings are supposed to be funny in the first glance, but they are not funny at all... the drawings are disguised behind the humor... humor is an international language... after you laugh it strikes you in the stomach.” His work doesn’t represent only a personal attitude, but brings to people an alternative to what and how media chooses topics and informs. The artist takes ideas and facts that are in the news on the planet, gives them a cartoonish style and taking a curatorial role he points, twists, and shows general human characteristics, concerns and ambitions.

Horia Bernea

Horia Bernea is known in the art world in Romania and Europe as a painter and as the founder of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest (ill. 5).

Horia Bernea represents for this study another example of curatorial and exhibition practice developed after 1990 in order to show the aftermath of the Communist regime and to reveal what was forbidden over that time. The 45 years of communism (after the Second World War) meant the collectivization of the land and the dismemberment of the rural society, an imposed migration from rural to urban, the disappearance of some villages, customs, crafts and beliefs, and finally the creation of the “new man” – the man of the communist era. His strategies in showing the old village life and the transformation of it after the war were the use of metaphors, symbols and poetic associations. He adopted another kind of trickster attitude that doesn’t show people what was damaged by the Communist Party ideology and practice, but shows what was saved from destruction and what people could become without this debilitating experience. He didn’t choose to show the ugliness, but the beauty of the world.

His curatorial practice is not didactic, but suggestive. The artist– curator uses fragments of objects, mixes collections, overlaps time periods and highlights ideas by manipulating light, perspective

and associations. This teaches, especially to the Romanian visitor, freedom. Every person is free to find his own interpretation and to build themes. “There is no linear itinerary. The visitor is forced to back-track, to compose his own itinerary, to move as in a house, to gradually approach an environment that unveils itself before his eyes.(...) The visitor doesn’t face an *exposition* but a *problem* to which the museum attaches some reference points.”¹² These curatorial techniques viewed as strategies were *handy* for Horia Bernea: his perspective towards the museum collection was that of an artist who had developed throughout his life a sensitivity for the rural world, a solid visual culture and a specific style in painting. More than that, the political context in the early ‘90s was favorable.

In 1990, in the fresh enthusiasm of the Revolution, a group of intellectuals succeeded in dissembling the Communist Party Museum in Bucharest and reinstalling there what used to be 100 years ago the Museum of National Art Carol I (Muzeul de Artă Națională Carol I), with its ethnographic collection. The new museum was called Museum of the Romanian Peasant (Muzeul Țăranului Român).

These two circumstances didn’t repeat, so today no other museum follows the new path Museum of the Romanian Peasant took. However, the museum became, during the first 10 years of Horia Bernea leadership and in the last 11 years, after his death, a point of reference of Romanian post-communist cultural identity and is a landmark of Romania in culture, tourism, education, and even ecology.

It is also important to mention that before that, in the ‘80s, many Romanian artists were interested in folk art and in its sacredness. The village became for these artists a source of inspiration and a battlefield for direct or subversive fights against communist cultural politics, a safe place to work free from Party ideology. The village was a resource of morphological repertoire: themes, materials and techniques, but also a place where they could work hidden from the eye of the Party cultural agent, and *under cover*, considering that, in approaching themes like Romanian nation, tradition, roots and heritage, the authorities would not interfere in their work. Furthermore, the village was a place of resistance against the official atheist Party politics: the artists used old folk art (environment and objects) and reiterated pre-Christian and Christian sym-

¹¹ Vartan (2007).

¹² Althabe (1996).



Ill. 5.
Caption from the exhibition
Triumph of the Museum
of the Romanian Peasant,
author Horia Bernea, paint-
ers Horia Bernea and Ioana
Bătrănu, Bucharest, 1996

bols in their contemporary artworks (the sun, the column, the shirt, the cross, etc.)¹³.

For both religious and non-religious, Bernea constructed his curatorship, together with an artists' team, on the sacredness of the Romanian rural life: "one of the strongest directions of Horia Bernea's new curatorial practice is the use of the museological language as a reflection on Christianity".¹⁴

Mihai Gheorghiu, historian and coworker of Horia Bernea, summarized the case of the curatorial program of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant built after 1990 as an antithesis of the old museology and as a way to clean the curatorial discourse from the ideological burden of the old regime. The new discourse developed by Horia Bernea tries to rebuild a non-ideological method to refer to nation, memory and past.¹⁵

MNAC – National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest (Muzeul Național de Artă Contemporană)

On the museum website we can read today about the opening seven years ago: „Prestigious publications welcomed the opening of a contemporary art museum in Bucharest as the international artistic environment became increasingly interested. (...)

The Museum is listed among the most important emerging centers of contemporary art in the world. (...) European T.V. stations dedicated space to detailed reports on the Museum and its opening. (...) Ambassadors in Bucharest from European countries expressed their enthusiasm about MNAC, some of them believing that the Romanian public might actually need some time to get used to the idea."

To understand the position and the meaning of the MNAC some history is necessary. Built by Nicolae Ceaușescu as part of a large urbanistic project, the building is today a symbol of dictatorship, a symbol of the traumatic past of the city. It is incredibly big, some people say it's the largest civilian administrative building in the world and others say it resembles the Royal Palace from Star Wars (ill. 6). "Twenty per cent of the city, including some of its oldest churches, was torn down to make way for it. Workers died in near-forced labor conditions; others are said to have been killed to protect its secrets. No wonder Bucharest's inhabitants view the House/Palace with a respect tinged with bitterness."¹⁶ Ceaușescu and his governing comrades didn't have the chance to move there; today the construction continues – in silence and with important costs. There were some plans to tear it down, but the too big and solid building, with its megalomaniacal blend of baroque, neo-Gothic and

¹³ Titu (2003: 192–193).

¹⁴ Manolescu (2007: 203).

¹⁵ Gheorghiu (2010).

¹⁶ Paul (2004).



Ill. 6.
House of the People before
1989 – House of the Parlia-
ment today, Bucharest

modernist influences remained in place. "When Ceaușescu was deposed in December 1989, in one of Eastern Europe's strangest and bloodiest revolutions, there was talk of turning the Palace into a giant casino. The decision to turn it into an art gallery instead has kicked off a spat of back-biting and accusations that may not have been seen on Romania's arts scene since artists had to queue up for Ceaușescu's personal patronage."

Hijacking or exorcism?

In 2004, James Paul writes in *The Guardian* an article about the new MNAC called „They have hijacked art”. Also in 2004, Petra Kipphoff publishes in *Die Zeit*, no.47 “Die Kunst des Exorzierens”. The first refers to the opinion that contemporary art had been confiscated by politics, and the second to the opinion that politics had been cheated by the arts!

Regarding one of the first exhibitions to be seen at the opening of the museum, “Romanian Artists (and not only) Love the Palace?!” the museum artistic director affirmed: “We have to exorcise the house”. She encouraged the 25 artists to create a dialogue of the country's post-communist condition.

What are the artists' opinions about housing the Contemporary Art Museum in the building that represents the Dictator's power? Is the decision to install there the newest art and artists' ideas a trickster strategy? Will the curators and the artists continue to use also trickster strategies to point out communist and post-communist issues and patterns that continue to shade the country?

I will point out some opinions of the artists I have previously mentioned and conclude with

the idea that artists who face a communist past and a post-communist present and who are concerned with global issues as well have to juggle with many and new strategies to find new artistic expressions and to build public awareness. The museum opened with “two exhibitions that chart the strange quantum leap that Romania and Romanian art have made in the past 30 years: a retrospective of work by the 1970s avantgardists Horia Bernea and Paul Neagu, and the self-examinatory, “Romanian Artists Love Ceaușescu's Palace?!” – a show dedicated to a love/hate relationship with the building that houses it.”¹⁷

The first exhibition proves how some Romanian artists could create despite the oppressive regime they lived in. Both Bernea and Neagu died before the opening of the MNAC.

The second exhibition, in which living artists show in their work humor, sarcasm, bitterness, irony, etc., “isn't intended as an overview of contemporary art, but it does make an interesting introduction to the video, installation and photography work happening in the country. More importantly, it presents a fascinating picture of the art world's various views of the Palace. In Josif Kiraly's *Indirect*, the building is a picture postcard from the revolution – a “tamed” monster. In Călin Dan's *Sample City*, it is the background to a Sisyphean urban fairy tale, holding pride of place in a Kafkaesque labyrinth. Daniel Gontz's *Trans* is a fantasy aid to the building's secret interiors, the spaces the public still can't access. And in Gorzo's *Are Jailed Sheep Zebras?* – a tribute to the ongoing violence of the Ro-

¹⁷ Paul (2004).

manian imagination – it is the setting for an urban/rural Transylvanian nightmare. If one thing links all of these works, it is an acknowledgement that the building is there to stay, and to be lived with.”¹⁸

“It is appropriate to question the wisdom of the decision to mark the past of this place and defuse the implication of the location of the museum. It is appropriate to question the wisdom of the decision to mark the opening of the museum with this exhibition. The best way to make a bomb explode, even if you’ve been trying to avoid it at all costs, is to hit it and then apologize. Ceaușescu’s Palace is not yet as recognizable as the Eiffel Tower, and the era of T-shirts that say “I love Ceaușescu’s Palace” has not yet arrived.”¹⁹

People in the field and a lot of artists expressed their agreement or disagreement with the choice of the building for contemporary art. Here I will show some opposing opinions in this regard.

KulturKontakt Austria considers that the placement of the National Museum of Contemporary Art represents a provocation for artists, curators and art critics, but also an opportunity to transform this edifice into a space for an international dialogue to address the development of partnerships with similar institutions in the rest of the world. The museum’s cultural strategy is based on the growing interest of younger generations in contemporary art and on the integration of these new energies into a productive dialogue between art and society.

From France: “Europe becomes richer through a new contemporary art museum, the one opened in Bucharest in the Palace of the Parliament. The edifice, known by the official name of “Palace of the People” or “Ceaușescu’s Palace”, loaded with dramatic history, is from this day forward a place of artistic effervescence – subjecting it to many interpretations.”²⁰

James Paul follows opinions of many artists and art critics in his article from 2004: “Mihai Oroveanu, the museum director, has said he hopes the museum presence in the House will help “purge” the building; “even though it takes up only about 4% of the space, a gleaming, glass, wood and white concrete exhibition space has been cut into the

once-kitsch wing where the Ceaușescu’s used to have their private apartments.”

“The place is full of bad memories,” says Dan Geta Brătescu, the *grande dame* of Romanian art. “But putting the museum into such an inhuman space has been a positive thing. This art has humor, and it helps.”

For exhibition curator Ruxandra Balaci, the building is a “challenge – huge, ironic, grotesque, everything!” She is sensitive to feelings about its history, but argues that perceptions of it are changing. “The younger generation is disposed to forget the past,” she says, “to look to the future.” And yet there are plenty of young, successful Romanian artists who think the installation of the museum in the Palace has turned contemporary art into a government poodle. Among the most vociferous are Dan and Lia Perjovschi. For them, the museum marks a return to the bad old days when the cultural police controlled the arts. “It’s a symbol of the past,” says Lia Perjovschi. “How can it be a symbol of the future?” The duo are unhappy that, with a whole city to choose from, the House was the only building the Ministry of Culture would consider for the project. This, they argue, has meant other gallery spaces dotted around the more bohemian *Calea Victoriei* (Victoria Avenue) area closing down. The sole focus for contemporary art now, they say, is the Parliament building. “What is that saying? The government has hijacked contemporary art.”

The line from the museum is that the House was the only site the government could afford. But Vlad Nanca agrees with the Perjovschis that this doesn’t make the building any more appropriate, or less irredeemable. “I’m not against the museum,” he says. “There are positive things that have come out of it. But exorcism? No, there is nothing you can do to this building to make it all right.”

In all the sniping, one man strikes a conciliatory note. Josif Kiraly – artist, teacher and mentor to many of the younger generation of artists – agrees the House is “not the best place” for the museum. But, he argues, “it’s better to put art there than many other things. I had a problem when they put Parliament there. But this is a way of parasiting the building. It’s not what Ceaușescu would have wanted for it – and that’s important.”

*

Soon, in the future, artists will look from the MNAC exterior glass elevator and from the 5th floor terrace towards the new People’s Cathed-

¹⁸ Paul (2004).

¹⁹ Leydier (2005).

²⁰ Hinkel (2004).

dral (ironically taking a similar name to the one Ceaușescu gave for the „House of the people”). Facing the entrance at the MNAC, the *Catedrala Neamului* will be finished in a few years. Here there is another controversy and Romanians argue for and against it. We are waiting to see how the artists will react to the appearance of this building and its proximity to the former House of the People, today House of the Parliament, and on the land where many beautiful old churches were demolished.

For me, in the post- communist era, a new building in the orthodox style will lead to a *post-orthodox cathedral*, very far from the well-proportioned, delicately painted, close-to-human-size traditional Romanian churches, or from other religious historical monuments vanished because of the dictator's atheism.

I am thinking myself what artistic trickster method I should use to protest against this new symbol of power.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

Patrycja Sikora, Piotr Stasiowski
BWA Wrocław – Galleries of Contemporary Art

Swindlers, rascals, parasites

Swindlers, Rascals, Parasites is the title of the event which took place on 26 October 2011 in Wrocław's Studio BWA, featuring the documentation of works revolving around the controversial theme of the artist as a trickster. The exhibition accompanied the international conference organized by the Institute of Art History, University of Wrocław, entitled *Trickster Strategies in the Artists' and Curatorial Practice*. Combining scholarly presentations with artistic actions was meant to assure artists' participation in the conference on the one hand, and inviting participating critics, curators and art historians to the gallery on the other. The intention was clear – an opportunity for a free exchange of views between practitioners and theoreticians of contemporary art, hopefully resulting in some interesting discussions.

A public institution of culture, as it seems, is probably among the least likely places to welcome subversive artists reacting to social discourse. Closing this form of artistic activity in a white cube of the gallery and separating it from the natural context of human interaction has a petrifying and counterproductive effect. Even though BWA Studio in Wrocław is not exactly the classic museum cube, its framework imposed by the municipal patronage may act as a potential mental limitation for the true nature of some artistic activities. As

the curators of artistic presentations accompanying the conference, shown in BWA under the collective title of *Swindlers, Rascals, Parasites*, and well aware of the conflict of interests, we decided that accepting the subtle game of meanings generated by this conflict would give us an opportunity to reveal the character and degree of complication of such relationships. We invited artists whom we rank among the most interesting representatives of trickstering in recent years: Jiří Surůvka, Jerzy Kosalka, Arek Pasożyt, Aleka Polis and Cecylia Malik. They reacted to the invitation in their own ways, based on different experiences. In fact, the situation they were confronted with had a double framework – one was the participation in an exhibition held in a public institution of art, and the other was the conference which the show accompanied.

Arek Pasożyt (ills. 1–5)

Arek Pasożyt (born in 1987) decided to earn his living as an artist by implementing the utopian idea of sponging on institutions of culture (*Pasożyt* means *Parasite*). He is not only a painter, photographer and performer, but also founder and leader of Gruba Najgorsza, an informal group established in 2006, contesting the gallery-curatorial system, assembling young debuting artists who criticize in-



III. 1. Female Parasite Casting, poster by Arek Pasożyt (Parasite), 2011, artist's archive



III. 4. Aleka Polis in Arek Pasożyt's (Parasite's) bed, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 2. Arek Pasożyt (Parasite) doing his laundry, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 3. Cecylia Malik, Arek Pasożyt (Parasite), Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 5. Arek Parasite's habitat in Studio BWA, in the background slide show with Aleka Polis' Holy Pictures' (with Jagna form Peasants), Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora

stitutionalized art. As a parasite artist he is a man for hire, first negotiating conditions with his host, and then becoming a lodger for a certain period of time. So far, apart from Wrocław's BWA Studio, he has chosen in Poland as his habitat e.g. the CoCA in Toruń, MCSW Elektrownia in Radom, Nad Wisłą Gallery in Toruń and AT Gallery in Poznań. In 2010, he established his *Militia* in Toruń's Centre for Contemporary Art, aiming for soft subversion and sabotage during artistic openings organized there. He tends to document his activities thoroughly and put the current reports on his blog <http://pasozyt.blogspot.com>, where you can also find his *Manifesto of Parasitism* (2010). At the beginning of the *Manifesto*, he explains his motivation: 'An artist is bound to create art – is both his occupation and *raison d'être*. He earns his living by either selling products, or by organizing exhibitions or performances. However, it is not uncommon that an artist, despite putting best efforts into his work, cannot support himself... He is forced to gradually abandon his love for art, in favour of profitable career. Thus, he dies as an artist. / In order to survive – or even make art lucrative – I embraced the idea of parasitismology.'

In this way, he finds the artist-institution analogy in the biological world, where one of the ways of surviving in the food chain is living on another organism. Arek's individual activities also include e.g. copying the pictures of famous painters (Lucian Freud, Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, Damien Hirst) in his 2010–2011 cycle *Parasite Painting*. Inhabiting BWA Studio for a full month (5 October to 5 November), Arek Pasożyt marked his presence in the gallery space by placing his duveted bed by the entrance and hanging his laundry to dry in the exhibition room. You could actually visit him, talk to him, see how he lived there, and even unofficially rent the gallery space from him to display your own works in return for an agreed sum of money, some food or service. It turned out there were in fact a few 'squatter' artists who made the deal, but how they paid for the right to exhibit their works was never revealed. However, the fact that Arek replicated the formula of a reality show by inhabiting a public place and making money this way was not an aim in itself. His main objective was to reproduce the idea of parasitism in a way which would allow it to spread and survive in the future.

Before the conference, Arek announced a series of auditions for a 'Female Parasite' on his blog

and using other promotional channels, including the BWA gallery website and newsletter. He met the candidates personally and finally selected one of them, Natalia, to live with him in the gallery. The stages of his casting procedure and its result were systematically described in his blog. Natalia, right from the start focussing on the artistic aspect of the project, did not find a common platform of agreement with Arek, who was rather interested in finding a partner for strictly marital purposes. Her decision to leave the gallery after about two weeks, on grounds of different views of their cohabitation, was the final straw which lay bare the weakness of the male point of view and the artist's ego, clearly in crisis at that time. In this way, the idea of reproduction was not carried out, and the lone Parasite left Wrocław after the conference was over, to continue his search for a new host organism.

Unlike Arek Pasożyt, Jiří Surůvka and Jerzy Kosalka appeared in the gallery just before the planned happening, which – as it soon turned out – was completely spontaneous and based on an impromptu script. The juxtaposition of those two exceptional, flamboyant personalities, known for their unusual, witty presentations often ridiculing the world of art and artist's role, seemed natural in the context of the conference devoted to tricksters.

Jiří Surůvka (ills. 6–14)

The Czech artist (born in 1961) came to Wrocław from Ostrava. He is a painter, performer, makes installations and objects. He also works as a lecturer at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Ostrava. In 1984, he founded the music group *Up to the Mines*. In the late 1980's, together with his cousin Peter Lysáček, he appeared at a number of rock festivals as a performer. In 1994–97, he organized the annual Festival of Action Art *Malamut* in Ostrava. Since 1998, together with his friends, he has been running the cabaret *Fun Masers' Comeback* (*Návrat mistrů zábavy*). He represented the Czech Republic at the Venice Biennale in 2001. He co-founded the artistic group František Lozinski o.p.s., formed in 2005 in Ostrava together with Peter Lysáček and František Kowolowski, criticizing the stereotypes and established norms in the world of art. One of Jiří Surůvka's recurrent characters appearing in his work is the figure of a superhero sorting out the art world, in various places and in different circumstances. In 2006, in protest against the conservative



III. 6.
Jiří Surůvka's and Jerzy Kosalka's
performance climax, Studio
BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011,
photo: Patrycja Piróg



III. 7.
Jiří Surůvka's and Jerzy Kosalka's
performance, Jerzy Kosalka sup-
porting the captives ('a party
within a party'), Studio BWA,
Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Pa-
trycja Piróg



III. 8.
Stage design for performance
by Jiří Surůvka and Jerzy
Kosalka, Studio BWA, Wrocław,
26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja
Sikora

III. 9.

Jiří Surůvka in Batman's outfit choosing his captives from the public, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 10.

Jiří Surůvka in Batman's outfit choosing his captives from the public, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 11.

Performance by Jiří Surůvka and Jerzy Kosalka, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora





III. 12.
Performance by Jiří Surůvka and Jerzy Kosalka, Jerzy Kosalka supporting the captives, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 13.
Jiří Surůvka's and Jerzy Kosalka's performance climax, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 14.
Stage design for performance by Jiří Surůvka and Jerzy Kosalka, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora

exhibition programme of one of Ostrava's galleries (Dům umění v Ostravě), he decided to ram the place Batman-style, with a Batmobile converted from an old Trabant car. He tried to crash it against the gallery, but unfortunately – due to the uneven ground – stopped inches from its wall. He then decided to abandon the vehicle right there, complete with a dummy of the artist-superhero inside. The installation criticizing the institution remained in front of the gallery for a full month. In a tight Batman outfit clinging to his plump body and driving a cardboard supercar, Surůvka is a Czech version of the Hollywood idol figure. He appeared in his costume on various occasions, including e.g. the Venice Biennale (2001) and the Wrocław exhibition *Shadows of Humour. Przykra sprawa CZEŠKa wystawa* (BWA Awangarda Gallery, 2006). As Batman the Cleaner, he mopped the monumental stairs of the former Hatzfeld Palace which currently hosts the Wrocław gallery.

Jerzy Koszałka (ills. 15-16)

The Wrocław-based artist (born in 1955) deals in painting, performance, installations and objects. He co-founded and was an active member of the legendary LUXUS group. One of his works – *The Battle of Kobłuck* – made from wrapping paper in 1986, was reproduced in the official Polish Language Textbook for the third grade of junior high schools in Poland. He designed the logo of *Cosat-Ca* and *Cosat-Ca Menthol*, referring to the graphic style of a popular fizzy drink. A multi-award winner, he has participated in scores of individual and collective exhibitions. The artist's irony and absence of ideological pomposity, as well as a sophisticated sense of humour, are clearly seen in his works and performances, which balance on the verge of absurdity, magic and current socio-political commentary. As a performer, he erected the monument to the Firefighter Dwarf (BWA Awangarda, Wrocław, 2008), introduced Polish curators as go-go club dancers in Berlin (Zero Gallery, 2008) and turned Coca-Cola into wine (BWA Awangarda, Wrocław, 2010). Jerzy Koszałka and Jiří Surůvka's joint action in the Studio gallery involved a typical set of means both artists use. In a Batman outfit and with his inseparable dog Emil ('a trickster coyote'), Surůvka invited selected members of the audience to proceed behind a screen curtain placed in the gallery. With Koszałka's help one hostage after the next was



III. 15. Koszałka and Jiří Surůvka with his "coyote" dog Emil during the performance, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora



III. 16. Koszałka and Jiří Surůvka with his dog Emil during the performance, Studio BWA, Wrocław, 26/10/2011, photo: Patrycja Sikora

gradually led to join the others already there, behind the decoration resembling a magician's space, only visible as a shadow play. The audience observed the behaviour of the 'prisoners'. The process was fairly long and at some point the viewer-participant proportion began to reverse – the audience was decimated at the cost of those behind the curtain, who were packed tighter and tighter. As the crowd got dense, the people began to feel like throwing a party, someone even opened a bottle of Polish vodka and served it to the other captives. Suddenly, when the density behind the curtain reached a critical point, the whole decoration fell to pieces, releasing the cheerful participants of the 'party in a party'.

Both Arek Pasożyt 'inhabiting' the Studio gallery space and the Surówka/Kosałka joint action were more or less literal criticisms of institutionalization, using a full range of pastiche elements, mockery and even the substance of the very institution in question for the purposes of a trickster show. Aleka Polis and Cecylia Malik, on the other hand, concentrated in their works on more universal, social aspects. Their activities did not refer directly to the situation in galleries or exhibitions, but actually were its contradiction. Their actions, shown in the form of photographic and video documentation, did not have the potential of artworks shown in exhibitions, they were in fact devoid of any artistic character. The two artists proved in this way that the status of an artist is not guaranteed by its affinity with the institutionalized system, or even that the system violates the primary notion of an artist and creator of culture. Dealing with specific social issues, they entrust the artist-trickster with the role of a social activist whose work should contain elements of political discourse as well as exert real impact on social and cultural problems.

Aleka Polis (ills. 17–18)

A fragment of Aleka Polis' (born in 1974) exhibition was composed of two videos and a few minor artefacts remaining after her earlier trickstering activities. The presentation included, among other things, several matchboxes painted the trickster colours of blue, black and red, with a brief descriptions of the three patrons of her inspiration – Lucifer, Venus and Prometheus, all connected by the idea of light-bearing. Apart from that, she mounted a series of four photographs on the wall, their size resembling the small holy pictures given away by

Catholic priests during their traditional pastoral visits, all containing an element of the virus exposing the hypocrisy of contemporary moralists. A frame from the Polish film *Chłopi* (based on Reymont's Nobel Prize-winning novel *Peasants*), in which Jagna hugs Mateusz, is captioned 'Jagna, defender of pure lust', turning her into a patron of those modern-day women who still have to pay a price for deciding about their bodies and sexuality. *Jesus the Good Shepherd*, apart from the lamb on his shoulders, also sports a baseball bat and bears an uncanny resemblance to a former leader of a certain Polish right-wing political party. The caption under this black-and-white reproduction says 'With hope towards the future'. *Mother of Air Force* is a frame from one of Polis' films featuring a figure of Our Lady with her arms extended over the emblem of Polish Air Force, placed near a beer garden in Warsaw's Praga district. Both the film and the stylized picture make us realize how deeply embedded in social discourse the Smolensk Disaster has got, and how banal the mass media have made it at the same time. And finally the fourth picture, entitled *The Tree of Knowledge*, is a frame from Aleka Polis' film *Judgement*, also containing symbolic biblical references. The film, one of the two shown in BWA Studio, presents a seemingly innocent scene. Two girls meet by a tree, one of them gives the other an apple, which she bites. Then the girls just walk away. The travesty of this well-known biblical story of the Tree of Knowledge and Original Sin becomes clear when we recognize the characteristic building of the Supreme Court in Warsaw, in front of which the tree is located. There is a maxim on a pillar behind the tree, saying 'NOBODY SHALL BE BURDENED BY SOMEBODY ELSE'S DECEIT'. This biblical story, interpreted in the spirit of *her-story*, with Eve handing the apple to another woman rather than to Adam, focuses our attention on the injustice of social exclusion of non-gender-normative people, no matter what the official declarations of freedom and independence in democratic societies state.

The other film made by Polis and presented in the gallery was *The Dildoism of Morality. Aleka Polis' Film and Photo Trial. Warsaw, Holy Saviour Church, 30 May 2011*. The term *dildoism* was invented by the artist to reflect the artificiality of attempts to impose one's own morality on others in the name of the equally artificial notion of higher humanistic values, founded on the symmetrical,



Z nadzieją w przyszłość

Jagno, co czystej chuci bronisz

Matka Sił Powietrznych

Drzewo Świadomości

III. 17. Aleka Polis, Holy Pictures, (from the left: With hope towards the future, 2005, Jagno, defender of pure lust, 2005, Mother of Air Force' 2011, The Tree of Knowledge, 2011), photo: artist's archive



III. 18. Aleka Polis, Trickster's Matches, 2010, photo: artist's archive

heterogeneous division of roles and duties resulting from gender differences. The video itself is the recording of an illegal action performed by Polis and her two female friends. Wearing black evening dresses and red neckerchiefs, they entered the Holy Saviour Church on a sunny May afternoon, when there was no service in progress, to be blessed by another friend acting as a priestess. The wedding white symbolizing innocence and virginity was replaced by the colour black, the duality of the standard married couple – by a trio of close friends (which, as Agnieszka Żechowska rightly points out in her text about Polis, also refers to the mystery of Holy Trinity), and the male priest, enviously protecting his sacrament-giving prerogative – by a priestess, a woman who democratically appreciates the right for all kinds of love and friendship, and their social codification. The action, bearing all the hallmarks of an anarchistic attack against the patriarchal institution of the Catholic Church, was not noticed until the last moment, when the three friends were spotted by a parishioner while leaving the church. A police report was duly made but there were no further legal consequences. The church decided it was yet another annoying prank by some degenerated – and thus in a way incomplete in their femininity – antagonists of faith and tradition.

Cecylia Malik (ill. 19)

Cecylia Malik (born in 1975) also used the form of documentation in her BWA Studio presentation. She showed her two previous actions, both embedded in the social context, and both rather extensively discussed in recent years as an alternative way of understanding art and its function. Her project *365 Trees* lasted one full year and covered every single day between 25 September 2009 and 24 September 2010. During that time, Malik climbed a different tree every day, documenting each of the places with a photograph. This seemingly banal idea, referring to the stereotyped role of a naughty tree-climbing tomboy, is in fact full of far more serious connotations. In its essence, it touches on the issue of limitations imposed on us in the use of the natural infrastructure for recreational purposes. Malik climbed various trees, starting from her native Cracow, where she chose the Planty greenery, through the trees in neighbouring towns, and finishing with Joanna Rajkowska's *Palm*

at Jerozolimskie Alley in Warsaw. The action was inspired by Italo Calvino's short story *The Baron in the Trees*, in which Cosimo, the protagonist, rebelled against his father's will and decided to live up a tree. As Malik describes the story herself, it's 'a fairy tale about rebellion, love and the implacability of being yourself'. The artist's gesture may be understood as a form of minor rebellion too, harmless insubordination against well-established social conventions. However, in the long run it becomes a symptom of our anchoring and sheltering in culture, which excludes non-standard behaviours, marginalizing them as hooliganism. Incidentally, at one point Malik was even ordered by City Guards to climb down the tree at once. What may be noticed while watching Malik's photos of the action is the way she poses while balancing on the branches, her body assuming rococo-style positions. This kind of expression is what we nowadays associate with free and happy people only.

Another project documentation that the artist presented in BWA Studio was the social movement she initiated together with Monika Drożyńska, Karolina Kłos, Justyna Koeke and 'Bocian' Zubrzycki. The Modraszek Collective was started as a protest against the decision of Cracow's municipal authorities, which allowed a developer to build a residential housing estate in the vicinity of Zakrzówek, a popular recreational lakeside spot. Started as a Facebook discussion, the initiative turned into an all-city demonstration referring in its visual side to the colour and wings of the Modraszek butterfly (*Common Blue* species), which has its habitat in the Zakrzówek area. A number of social interventions, the Modraszek March of the 'indignants', speeches and appeals to support a limitation of housing developments in one of the few recreational grounds in Cracow – all led to the City's withdrawal of the original project of erecting a housing estate there. It was a tangible success, but as uplifting as it appears to be, it cannot change the fact that the Collective was but one of the very few post-1989 initiatives capable of consolidating people on a scale which would prevent a large, private entrepreneur from endangering the unity of a local community. The immense social response, confirmed by nominating the action for the culture award *Kulturalne Odloty* of the local edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper, proved how necessary this form of artistic expression is. It is a far cry from the popular, egocentric image of the artist-creator, hovering in the vacuum



III. 19. Cecylia Malik, Palm, 247th Tree of 365, (artificial palm tree is an artwork by Joanna Rajkowska) 29/05/2010, Aleje Jerozolimskie, Warsaw, 365 Trees Project, photo from artist's archive

of his own genius. The stages of the Collective's actions can still be followed on the blog: <http://modraszekkolektyw.blogspot.com>.

Allowing rascals, swindlers and parasites to enter a public institution at the time when the University was running an academic conference was a curatorial decision. The decision resulted from a probably naive belief in the myth of unrestrained freedom in art and acceptance of unpredictable actions within established frameworks, including also activities which may blow up the institution from the inside or even undermine its function. Even though someone like a trickster-curator does not exist in a municipal gallery (it is impossible by definition as he or she is its full-time employee, thus on the other side of the barricade), then at least such a person opens the door wide to welcome unruly artists, making a draught which airs the salons of art. Therefore, as curators we allow the artists to act, we let them – and for the famed 'public money' at that – criticize the system, even laugh at it. This practice is far from innovative, of course – after all, kings had their trickster-fools too. We pay the fees, we reimburse travel expenses, we promote, and in return we get a parasite who graciously sponges on the body of an institution (which means that the

host organism is strong enough to feed someone else too). We even allow a vulgar Batman figure to scrub our institutional stairs or entertain the audience in a hilarious happening. The costs are not high. The trickster appears to be ours, tame, 'bought'. What he does may not be entirely politically correct, perhaps the way he acts is not scripted or predictable, even for the organizers, but there is always an unspoken conviction that those are after all serious artists and they would not set fire to the gallery, would they? However, there is always a possibility that we may be surprised one day. But for the time being we want to believe we do not deserve a big fire, at least not one for which we have paid ourselves.

Translation: Jerzy Chyb

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Three gaps in the process?

We can actually ask whether the trickster strategy can be helpful in general practice of the modern museology, or even in presenting the arts in general? When museums were full of pomposity, usurped the right to be the only full-fledged productions of human genius, raw and steadfast as the rock of Gibraltar, the answer was clear – yes! But now, when the artists made their own revolution, when the implosion of art took place, every piece of peeled methods turns out to be equivalent and the contemporary discourse has become divided in many voices, agonists noisy attitudes, trends and beliefs, there is a doubt which would serve such a subversive figure, and what actually impact from this daring proposal could be made in such a mass of equally?

Of course trickster recognized as a cause of change, perpetual motion and ambient undermining the status quo, is a multidimensional character. This eternal outsider, usually bearing a high price for his antics (often done in good faith) can be seen as a critical subject of academic analysis and thus included in the general circulation of socially acceptable and useful attitudes.

In years 2007–2010, I made three exhibitions which, despite considerable differences, were quite similar in some ways. These shows were: *Museum of Games* (14.12.2007–15.02.2008, [ill. 1](#)), *Pol-*

ish Quality (16.10.2009–28.02.2010, [ills. 2–4](#)) and *Politics – Polish elections from 1944 to 2010* (7.07.2010–26.09. 2010, [ill. 5](#)), and were presented at the Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej (Museum of Contemporary Art), a department of the Muzeum Narodowe (The National Museum) in Szczecin. Truth to be told, I'm not sure if the strategies I used, can be called "tricksters", although some humor and perversity in the approach to the topic were very important. To refer by their example to the raised issue, first of course, they must be presented.

The first exhibition of this series alluded primarily to the concept of Jerzy Ludwiński's *Games field*. In a sense, it was a meta-artistic exhibition, telling about art as such, the elements of its identity, language and relationships that exist between individual works. It is written in a brochure accompanying the exhibition: "At the exhibition are collected works of Polish artists, representing trends mostly described as avant-garde, aspiring to bridge the boundaries of art and further broaden the scope and freedom of artistic expression. [...]"

The works were compiled together in terms of a game, without assigning them to the tendency or the date of origin, referring to the concept of Jerzy Ludwiński's *Games field* are arranged in a manner that present them in the space of multi-layered dialogue. It was a kind of experiment, different from



III. 1. Museum of Games. Polish modern art from three West Pomeranian collections. Museum of Contemporary Art, department of The National Museum in Szczecin, 14/12/2007–15/02/2008, photo: Michał Ciesielski

usually based on historical thinking, previous ways of exposing contemporary art. Works were assigned to eight topics (*Alphabet, Matter, Light and color, Artifacts, Word, Line, Tension energy and Humor*) presented as a proposal, one of the possible ways of perceiving art emerging since 1945.

[...] Therefore the exhibition is not attempting to present historical approach, but rather some kind of a game where every visitor can participate on equal terms – finding their own links between the works, using their own imagination and knowledge he can find in other museums, galleries and books.”¹

By applying the system of various departments, I managed not only to avoid the historical adjustment of the art pieces, but also enabled to build relationships between them within each group. Placing the works of the same artists in different contexts (such as the Henryk Stażewski's works in departments *Alphabet, Light and color* and *Matter*) would free them from being perceived only as purely aesthetic objects.

¹ Ciesielski (2008).

On the one hand, the intended non-historical approach, mixing, no fixed order of sightseeing, had to serve the analysis of the language of art, its various forms, on the other to reveal the main perpetrators of this diversity, the artists themselves. Thus department *Tension energy* emerged, dedicated solely to artists creative activity and the relationships that prevail among them. “The art gained a new dimension – energy. It is no longer subordinated to create more artifacts or conceptual designs. It has dispersed, while personalizing itself – there stopped functioning all patterns. Individual artistic attitude has become an essential criterion of credibility. Józef Robakowski described this unusual phenomenon saying: »Our intuition already knows that there is currently substantial revaluation taking place, and in fact a breakthrough. THE ART RESIGNED FROM ITSELF, THANKED US«, and continued: »Its image is ACTIVITY, changed into artistic signs in forms of most diverse gestures made at your own risk, absolutely unfettered by civilization. Seemingly, our art is invisible and even undetectable in everyday life, but it works for sure – we can feel it by ours constant causation. (...) There are new forms of activities that ruthlessly attacks the mental stereotypes, enable us to live with a sense of independence within the culture and political change.«”²

This very human aspect of the exhibition was also highlighted by the works collected in the *Humor* section. Although the selection was limited to a few objects, it was very significant, on the occasion also as a part of relaxation after participating in a rather difficult lecture which was the whole exhibition. The show, testing new methods of presentation of contemporary art, was an introduction to further learn and explore it on one's own.

Another exhibition, *Polish Quality*, had already been built on a slightly changed conditions, based on accumulated observations, mainly based on the assumption that the viewer is aware of the artists' role as a major reason for the works of art existence. Strategies used in the building were enriched with a new, but very important element, which purpose was to turn the viewer into an active construction of meanings of the exhibition.

In addition to presented artistic artifacts, the elements of stage design played important role – as equal parts of the show, though, naturally the art

² Ciesielski (2008).

III. 2.

Polish Quality. Polish modern art from the collection of the National Museum in Szczecin and Regional Collection of the Zachęta Contemporary Art Association in Szczecin, Museum of Contemporary Art, department of The National Museum in Szczecin, 16/10/2009–28/02/2010, photo: Michał Ciesielski



III. 3.

Polish Quality. Polish modern art from the collection of the National Museum in Szczecin and Regional Collection of the Zachęta Contemporary Art Association in Szczecin, Museum of Contemporary Art, department of The National Museum in Szczecin, 16/10/2009–28/02/2010, photo: Michał Ciesielski



pieces were the real “heroes” of the performance. All used items came from the museum stores. They were, therefore, camp beds, bicycles, shovels, radios, travel kits, ladder, showcases and cabinets, or even in one case, the “reconstructed” museum-like work place, etc. But these were not presented, as seen for example at design exhibitions or in ethnographic museums, but rather a composition set to close a “still life” or art installations. These structures were used as “context fixation” for the presented works of art, but also to neutralize, seemingly ster-

ile and intellectually neutral in nature, exhibition halls.

“It is the author’s attempt to reflect on the “Polish ways” to modernity, implemented and recorded in the pieces of art. These works were often very critical to the gray and gloomy everyday life, often burdened with mindless routine. But there are also different, presenting the opposite attitude, idolatrous, fully submitting to the demands of their times. This type of artistic actions at the same time touch upon sensitive issues, still caused



III. 4.

Polish Quality. Polish modern art from the collection of the National Museum in Szczecin and Regional Collection of the Zachęta Contemporary Art Association in Szczecin, Museum of Contemporary Art, department of The National Museum in Szczecin, 16/10/2009–28/02/2010, photo: Michał Ciesielski



III. 5.

Politics - Polish elections from 1944 to 2010, Museum of Contemporary Art, department of the National Museum in Szczecin, 07/07–26/09/2010, photo: Wojciech Ciesielski

in a discussion about the Polish national character, such as mediocrity, intellectual convenience or opportunism. These unpleasant tendencies manifest themselves not only in the subjects presented in the works, but often also in their own forms of realization or in clumsiness in imitation of global trends.

However, there are not only the bad examples of creative work presented. At the same time exhibition shows works of artists with completely different attitude. Compiled together, they provoke the viewer to search for the authentic gestures and to

respond to existing objects in the exhibition. The works are presented in four groups: *Work*, *Politics*, *Polish quality* and the *Ordinary life*.

Presented objects are taken from two collections: the Muzeum Narodowe in Szczecin and Regionalna Zachęta Sztuki Współczesnej in Szczecin. These are both works of outstanding Polish artists and average products of “artistic manufacture”. Thus, the exhibition reveals the overall picture of art deposited in museums, in its different manifestations and different qualities. This is also a propo-

sition to look at Polish art in non-historical manner, which ignores the main trends, in the way in which works are read completely individually. On this ground there can be observed different manipulations and strategies often used by art curators, to match reality with predetermined thesis, often at the expense of authentic significance of the presented works. This is also reflected in the quality of actions.”³

So widely recognized problem enables active participation of the audience which, often without additional incentives, recognize in their opinion the worst and the best presented art works. Interestingly, if indication of the second ones depended primarily on taste, so the first ones were identified almost by all the same.

This exhibition was therefore also a reflection on the status of art pieces collected in the museums, penetrating the role and the methods used by the curator in order to achieve his goals, his exposure. To achieve this goal I perverse used popular type of “contextual” exhibition – in ethnographic-like museums. Through the collision of idealistic picture of art with the real situations created by the author, I created a conflict that was intended to provoke the viewer to find individual contact with collected objects.

Consistently following this line of thought it was decided that the next exhibition in the series would be open in June 2010, exactly between the first and second round of presidential elections. New element in exhibition named *Politics*, added to the strategy and which idea was to support its influence, was its absolute validity. The effect was reinforced by a seemingly paradoxical decision to use almost exclusively historical objects. The only exception, was the art piece appealing directly to the events that took place in front of the presidential palace in the very first hours after the crash in Smolensk. Stage design elements, which previous acted as “contextual anchors”, have been replaced by real time in which the exhibition was presented. The first room was covered with daily newspapers, which, apart from the results of the first round and projections for the second, presented at the same time sporting events, world disasters, celebrities scandals and all the other messages present in the contemporary press. In addition, I decided to use some sound sleepers accompanying permanently. In

one of the rooms were mixed and overlapping different “sounds of war”: whistles, explosions, shooting, songs and marches. The second contained a variety of well known politicians speeches, both from the communist era and contemporary, compiled on the basis of overlapping noise, preventing from hearing individual words. The purpose of these elements was to provoke the audience to find quick and intuitive associations.

“Exhibition *Politics – Polish elections 1944–2010* does not claim to be interpretation of the teachings of political science. [...] The aim of the exhibition is to remind us the way of Polish politics and *raison d'état* over the past 66 years, seen through art. [...] But it is not only a history lesson, but rather a record of certain events listed in art. Artists, like all citizens tend to be equally involved in various political systems, so it is a reflection of certain attitudes and beliefs. Art can be both, a tool of propaganda and the expression of individual freedom. More generally, by choosing specific art works collections gathered in museums become signs of their own times, their political necessity. It is important to look at the collections from this point of view. The exhibition is divided into four sections [...]: *Entanglement, War, Free choice, History and culture*.”⁴

Seemingly, this exhibition was the closest to the concept of *critical museum* presented by Piotr Piotrowski, however, its primary goal once again was to rebuild intellectual space of influence for collected art works, and thus to propose an invitation to direct dialogue between the viewer and presented art pieces.

In summary, one can point out some characteristic elements – strategies I consistently used in my subsequent projects. First of them are non-historical and non-aesthetical systems used in the presentation of works of art. In my opinion, these two elements (traditional historical and aesthetical grasps) are in fact, primarily responsible for “killing” the art works collected in museums – by treating them as objects of research, apart from their real meaning – an artist, and by creating a wall in a process of personal and direct communication between them and the viewer.

Another important element is breaking the structure of the exhibition into individual chapters, but the objects presented in the framework of these can be exchanged, mixed, not only fitting into one

³ Ciesielski (2009).

⁴ Ciesielski (2010).

shot. In addition, some of the objects are used again in consecutive shows. By this strategy the scheme of the potential manipulation of curator imposing way of reading the works, is in exposure, on the other hand the viewer is provoked to use his own intuition to interpret them.

The third issue is the usage of stage designs allowing free movement through the exhibition, without imposing any relevant directions, and also the usage of “contextual anchors” that are disrupting the homogeneity of the exposition, confronting art pieces together, building a context by the associations which were brought to the exhibition by visitors itself.

All of these used strategies can make an impression of flickering instead one arranged picture that unite the whole in one uniform message. Perhaps those “tricks”, interfering with the seemingly obvious and generally accepted interpretation (obvious to historians and art critics), lability of contexts or humor, also can be considered as trickster strategies.

In my opinion, however, in recent times the biggest freak in world related to museums, bearing the hallmarks of more powerful trickster, was an agreement made at the initiative of the French government, and concluded “between the Louvre Directorate and Abu Dhabi Emirate, which permitted the granting of the name” Louvre “- revised in such as the “brand” – and to transfer, under conditions of this agreement, some part of its collection to Abu Dhabi, to set up there a new museum, which would be inaugurated in 2012.”⁵ We could say this is of the symptoms of the crisis consuming contemporary museology, namely the devaluation of the importance of museums and converting them into globalized entertainment.

While working at the museum I discovered repeatedly that the job as an art curator, especially dealing with the so-called contemporary art, is fraught with a number of dangers, and not just in bureaucratic matter. The first of them is a condition of contemporary culture. Steve Dietz points to interpenetrating of many areas of activity, which at the same time are in conflict. After Chantal Mouffe, he takes agonistic conception of democracy, which is the process of engaging into the wider public debate more and more diverse number of actors – interest groups. So it is a continuous, shifter

discourse, taking the form of continuous dispute.⁶ Willy-nilly, everybody should take a clear position, preferably in line with of general expectations related to the function represented, as a result of that this position is becoming increasingly stiffens. On the one hand it is a good situation for the entire system, enabling the co-operation of the different forms of activity, however, at the same time it limits the chance of changes occurring within the same entity, in this case the museum.

As Piotr Piotrowski rightly points out, a clear conflict is emerging between layout practitioners – theorists, and, in this case, academics – curators.⁷ In my opinion, it is because the agonistic nature of the modern world. However, the current crisis is manifesting itself in the museum practice on many different levels, it exists within from the very beginning, since the establishment of the very first national collection. Maria Popczyk presents Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, who was one of the first critics of the institution and who noted the problem of interference in reception and loss of context for objects collected therein.⁸ This issue was taken up repeatedly by many authors, perhaps most emphatically by artists themselves who have suffered the most severe price. Not without reason it has been said about “slow death” of works collected in the name of some higher, abstract ideas.

Moreover, we can add to this picture ambitions and beliefs of some curators themselves, focused on grand narratives and subordinate to them art pieces selected for the exhibitions or collections. “The fact that the museum gives context to the work of art, it is undisputed, but the curator also can distort the significance of works of art in many ways, the works are becoming silent when both, objects are used to construct the conflicting narratives of their own pronunciation, and when they are presented with no concept for their better understanding.”⁹

The proposal to burn all museums was, of course, unenforceable, but the futurists call perfectly captured the sentiments of artists and their righteous indignation. For almost the entire twentieth century artists have been undertaking various actions against the hegemony of the curators, such as attempting to escape in a completely new spaces

⁵ Clair (2009: 6). Now we know that, the opening was rescheduled on 2014.

⁶ Dietz (2010: 379).

⁷ Piotrowski (2011: 27).

⁸ Popczyk (2005: 8).

⁹ Popczyk (2005: 26).

and situations of art, for example like actions by Daniel Buren, as described by Violetta Sajkiewicz.¹⁰

Potential for change has come precisely from this side. Łukasz Guzek accurately indicates the historical turning point at the 60s and 70s and the formation of conceptual artists as the main cause of significant changes made to the functioning of modern art. He mentions the work of Joseph Kosuth and Jan Świdziński who were engaged in seeking the proper role and context of art as such.¹¹ However, the artists proposals can be implemented at the most in the institutions created by them, or set up exclusively for the presentation of contemporary art.

More recently, due to some academic studies appeared a chance to change this state of affairs. Piotr Piotrowski in his book outlines the theory and the purposes of so called new museology.¹² Indicating the opportunity to museums in participation in the global discourse and taking in on a local forum, he sees in this action a way out of the impasse in which they are and the chance to re-enable the discussion about objects collected by them. Unfortunately, I fear that in this another way to subordination of works of art to another great narratives, which so easily lead to manipulation of curators.

In my practice I'm relying essentially on three concepts, which I hope, allows me avoidance aforementioned reefs, in better or worse way. One of them is Jerzy Ludwiński's concept of *Muzeum Sztuki Aktualnej* [*Museum of Contemporary Art*].¹³ The most important principle on which it was based, was *Action department* within the most recent phenomena of art would be analyzed, and sometimes even provoked into existence, at the same time it was a playing field within which new developments would arise. *Collections department* was treated equally dynamic, which would change a collection depend on current presentations, depending on demand, adapting and adding context to the current exhibitions. It seems that such model of the collection functioning, is also possible to apply to the more static institutions.

In turn, the potential of changes occurring within work of art itself, and more specifically, its meaning, as an integral element lying at the very

foundation of its existence, was main idea related by Jan Świdziński constructing his theory: "The Contextual Art propose a sign, within the criterion of truth is determined by the pragmatic context and by this it is constantly changing (starts to be the case that "p" – begins to be the case that no "p"). Object "O" takes the meaning of "m" in time "t" in place of "p" in situation "s", in relation to the person / people "o" then and only then. Changing any of these parameters obsoletes the previous meaning."¹⁴

This seemingly obvious observation, clearly indicate why the works of art are so susceptible to manipulation, especially in such a hermetic systems, such as museums. On the other hand, there is disclosed a remarkable potential in confrontation and collision of meanings, which allows to build a completely new relationship with the viewer – a participant of the exhibition, stimulating its activity.

At this point of creating the exhibition I refer to the concept of Józef Robakowski's *Separate Art*, as a manifestation of individual creative activity. Because in the relationship in communication, which is communing with art, the most important is the layout artist – the recipient, with the work as a medium, a curator at the most should be a mediator. Unfortunately, as I already mentioned, a museum deprives works of art of most of its authentic meaning, namely the artist. Not being able to actually go in replace, I can only try to prepare conditions to a direct contact with the work as an artistic message, by using the methods already described.

All of these actions and strategies have one fundamental goal. By obscuring, blurring the overall picture, constructing contexts and masking my own opinion, I try to provoke the unprepared viewer to elaborate an authentic, committed and open reception of contemporary art. Recovery of works of art meanings for artists and for viewers, is done by creating new contexts, detaching them from status of the museum objects, received as static and unchanging, but also not by acting contrary to the original intentions of their authors. There is no one-dimensional works – their meanings are multiplying. Perhaps it is at this point you can track the perverse trickster strategy.

Jerzy Ludwiński said: "You can imagine works of art, among other ways, as a way of revealing the creative process. Therefore they are windows on the creative process, or gaps in the process. It can be as-

¹⁰ Sajkiewicz (2005: 529).

¹¹ Guzek (2005: 467).

¹² Piotrowski (2011: 48).

¹³ Ludwiński (2003: 89).

¹⁴ Świdziński (2009: 23).

sumed that the most fascinating is what you can not directly see, what is “between”. In the works of art itself there are such “between” areas. In such situations observer is sometimes both way equally privy and helpless.”¹⁵ I hope that the exhibition can also be such gap.

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¹⁵ Ludwiński (2003: 260).

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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The Romanian trickster artist in the contemporary cultural environment

Contemporary art assumes the role of the manufacturer of a new artistic reality.¹ Every exhibition tells a story about the artist and his artworks. The story line of the exhibition is presented to the public according to the curator's ideas.² The autonomy of art is an illusory definition: there are institutions that promote just a single kind of art, one kind of artistic style in the struggle to have more visitors. Promoting an artist that creates an artwork in a different style than usual is considered sometimes a mistake.³ A work of art is no longer a mirror of the world, but a creation of a world that belongs only to the artist and put in scene by the curator. We are allowed to enter in this world where the artist lives, but we are not supposed to understand it fully. There is no longer one single world, but a series of worlds that belong to different artists. There is no longer one single type of art as the one promoted in the communist Romanian era, but an array of accepted personal styles.

In order to understand the Romanian contemporary cultural environment, we must perceive the ideas of the communist era and how the artistic process was limited during almost 40 years. Images

(paintings, sculptures) designed by artists were made in order to redefine a historical reality desirable for the manifesto of the Socialist Party. During the communist era, the status of an artist was changed. To be an artist during socialism meant precisely to exercise a profession, to create/ re-create a certain reality under strict rules and theories about the composition, subjects and topics. The artist, after 1945 is required to support the creation of building the socialist reform. The artist becomes a factor of social education, able "to present to the next generations the ideas of socialism."⁴ The realistic art is used to represent the imposed by the Party – ordinary life of a socialist person. Art is used to create the ordinary aspects of everyday life, to denounce what is unsuitable in a socialist society and to highlight the true nobility and dignity of the man.

The cultural revolution of socialism redefines also, the role of the museum. Such a museum must meet certain standards. The museum is no longer seen as an independent institution, but in a relationship with history high school offices and with public organizations. Regardless of the basic profile of the museum exhibits, the artworks were defined as original and demonstrative objects. The original objects have artistic and scientific value and

¹ Titu (2003: 23).

² Groys (2008: 44).

³ Stallabrass (2004: 80).

⁴ Bogdan (1959: 74).

are owned by the museum as the keeper of cultural values. The demonstrative objects which spread information, are purely academic, and the museum uses them in order to perform its functions of education and training.⁵ The museum is an institution for researching, recovering and promoting a certain cultural heritage. Also, the main functions of a museum are the conservation and restoration of artworks. The first definition of a museum is given by the heritage preservation and the development of science that constantly requires to be enriched by purchasing new artworks and by donations. Also, the most important definition of the museum during the communist era is the clear and consistent transmission to the public of cultural values imposed by politics, through direct contact with exposed objects and in an indirect manner by publications, conferences, movies and documentaries.

Julian Stallabras defines the autonomy of contemporary arts as an illusory definition, art institutions imposing/proposing each day certain artistic styles⁶. Art academies, cultural departments, museums and professional centers ask the artist to create an artwork in a certain style. Simple object became artworks when they are placed in an exhibition, in a museum, or by being defined as “masterpieces” by curators, art critics and art theoreticians. In order to understand ordinary objects transformed into artworks by trickster-artists, viewers should have the impression of an art-world machine that takes objects away from their functional environment, recycles and recombines them.⁷ This recycling, recombining proposed by contemporary artists is an attempt to define a new cultural identity of an object which was considered common. Also, they try to recreate a new cultural identity to the history, in Romania’s case a new cultural identity for the communist icons. The trickster artist tries this recycling and recombining of elements. The trickster plays with concepts, colors and images in order to invent and re-brand the communist icons.

Iconic works of the past century no longer serve as singular sources of inspiration for contemporary art. It is the artists’ imagination and their way of forging an identity for themselves that have become sources of inspiration. Through their creations, contemporary artists want to create their own identity,

their own style, by which the public may recognize them. Artists no longer need to use the same subjects or themes that have been used by several other artists before them, they have their imagination as a source of inspiration, by combining and recombining styles and images. It is hard for a trickster to invent his world without being copied by another contemporary artist. By recombining and recycling the communist icons, the trickster is playing it [almost] safe. The artist is aware of the attention given to the communism icons and therefore uses these images in an attempt to create to himself/herself a brand. But not just a single artist is using this images in order to invent/re-invent his style. The artists from Romania turn their attention to these images, so during the year 2011 there have been over ten art exhibitions that have dealt with communism and its images. Each artist came up with his own interpretation of communism. The most stunning exhibition in my opinion was *The Golden Flat&Co*, opened at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest. The communist period in Romania was defined by the political institutions as the Golden Age of technology, science, literature and arts. Alexandru Poteca, the artist behind the exhibition *The Golden Flat&Co* is using the metaphor The Golden Age literally. He paints everyday object from the communist era using gold sheet. Everything seems to be made of gold: toys, shoes, the table and chairs, the TV, the fridge, the entire bathroom. *The Golden Flat&Co* is exhibited in the most representative communist building: The People’s House in the National Museum of Contemporary Art wing. This museum is created in 2004 in the People’s House, the most prominent symbol of communism in Romania. In this case, both the museum and artist have followed the easy path by exhibiting works recombining communist icons in a building filled with these symbols. The museum is a trickster by using a communist iconic building for the contemporary art exhibitions.

There is no last subject in contemporary art anymore. The limits to how artistic representation and rendering should be made no longer function as rules. Topics addressed by the artist are varied and difficult now. The artists will not know from the start if their artwork will be accepted or not by society, and this is the most difficult part of being a contemporary artist.⁸ The artist can be a genius,

⁵ Budeanu (1977: 33–34).

⁶ Stallabras (2004: 10–30).

⁷ Stallabras (2004: 80–85).

⁸ Oroveanu (2000:20).

but if he/she cannot find the perfect moment to exhibit their creations or cannot find a good cultural manager, their status will be limited. In order to be a contemporary artist, the painter, the sculptor must be unique, by creating a different world in his creations, by choosing and believing in his ideas about how to behave in society. Ion Grigorescu, a famous Romanian artist, is behaving like a simple person, acting simple, wearing black or gray clothing. By trying to be ordinary in his personal manifesto, it is not the artist who should make a statement, but his creations.

The trickster or almost a trickster artist is playing with the notions of kitsch. Nona Șerbănescu's paintings have a very colorful textile frame, Ana Bănică creates artworks with cotton on white textiles, and Valeriu Mladin made a cocoa portrait of the American president, Barack Obama. For all these three artists kitsch is a part of their style. They are reinventing the notions of kitsch in such a manner so their style is unique. Nona Șerbănescu's colorful textile frame is for now, her artistic signature. Even if Nona's objects presented on canvas are the usual ones: a cat, the North Railway station in Bucharest, the portrait of her mother, her unique statement is the colorful frame of the paintings. Ana Bănică uses the old traditional white materials with colorful cotton and presents scenes from contemporary everyday life: a couple staying in bed, or a love letter.

The trickster status must be self-assumed. Pierre Pinoncelli is the most famous example of self-assuming the trickster status. The cultural identity of *The Fountain* made by Marcel Duchamp changed when Pierre Pinoncelli urinated on it in the year 1993. He contributed to the change which occurred in the production of artworks: His act of urinating in Duchamp's *Fountain* transformed him into an artist. The artistic intention to create a new artwork was accomplished by a simple action. The public's reaction to his act changed his status from a striver artist to an actual one. Pierre Pinoncelli used Duchamp's ready-made work to create his own present moment, in his personal history.

In order to make an impression in the contemporary art the Romanian artist has five ways of expressing him/herself: firstly to play it safe, by making painting or sculptures in an Academic manner, using the same techniques and colors in the same way as the old masters. The second way of expression is using communism icons in order to re-create this part of history in an ironic style. Attacking the

religious and political aspect is another way of creating contemporary art. The artist can invent objects that do not exist in real life in order to become a contemporary artist. Last but not least, an artist can rely on nature aspects, with the daily life in the XXI century. All these ways of expression are the categories from which every contemporary artist starts his statement. The tricksters are the ones that continue to use this way of expression even if they can rely on different style than these ones. An artist is a trickster if he wants to use the easy way in order to be a part of the artistic world. Like Pierre Pinoncelli, the artist can reuse an icon in his own style, but keeping a lot of aspects of the original artwork. The portrait of the Romanian communist president, Nicolae Ceaușescu is reused by artists using different colors, styles, techniques, but in all these creations, the artist's imagination is not so much important as the message: communism was a hard political system, and we are allowed to mock it right now. This mockery is not an artistic one, it is just simply mockery. In my opinion by returning to the same communist icons, the artists don't want to make it to the new stage in their artistic life. They are mocking a political system, the image of Ceaușescu and other socialist symbols. This way they are not trying to reach their own artistic identity. Copying the image of Ceaușescu is easy and most of the times it is a good strategy to assert oneself in the artistic world. These painters, sculptors most of them very young choose this easy way in order to become contemporary artists. They are not trickster just because they are recombining communist icons, they are tricksters because they choose the easy and beaten path in order to be taken into account in the contemporary Romanian artistic world.

The modern aesthetics is defined by the transition from the regime of representation to the regime of presentation⁹. According to Theodor Adorno the contemporary artist is defined as a neurosis person inserted in a society governed by the division of labor. An artist must pay for his canvas, for his colors, and must pay a rent for his workshop. She/he is a citizen paying taxes¹⁰. By creating artworks in a safe style, natural, colorful and joyful subject, the artist is a trickster with his own status. By working for an easy success, the artist is a trickster. This contemporary artist obeys normal rules

⁹ Rancière (2009: 13).

¹⁰ Adorno (2006: 17).

and conventional behavior of the aesthetic theory of the XX century. The time for nature subjects has passed, contemporary art, according to Adorno is the shock that shatters all tradition, we cannot pretend that we can use the same value judgments to evaluate an artwork.¹¹

The troubled tricksters are the ones that disobey and attack religious and political aspects. They attack aspect they do understand, but want to mock. They mock their own religion, their contemporary political system and all in all they mock themselves as individuals trapped in that world. They are the real bad tricksters from the spectators' point of view. Alexandru Rădvan, Ioana Nemeș, Roman Tolici are artists exhibiting also in Romania that re-present religious and political aspects in their own unique style. Alexandru Rădvan presents Judah as a person bleeding, and feeling pain. For Ioana Nemeș the act of confession is just a mockery, and in one of Roman Tolici's exhibition Jesus is replaced by a rabbit.

Contemporary art is a work in progress, and artists are finding new resources, new ways of expression by creating unreal objects. Felix Deac uses a polymer skin to make a pillow, Vlad Berte makes a backpack out of stone, and the Romanian architect, Justin Baroncea invents new structures on paper. In 2008, Georges Didi-Huberman uses the notion of anachronism, as the main characteristic of art history, which results from the impact that images have over the ordinary viewer. For contemporary art, the notion of anachronism is a very used one¹². All the contemporary artists can be defined as Anachronists after the end of art in 1964 when Andy Warhol made the *Brillo Boxes*¹³, and after the year 1989, when all the communist societies in Europe dissolved.¹⁴

Artists are paid to create artworks and not to transform themselves into everyday persons.¹⁵

An exhibition is not made in order to win a prize, also it is not just a shop where the artworks: paintings, sculptures or other works of art are presented to the public.¹⁶ An exhibition is a place where the public comes into direct contact with the artist and his ideas. The exhibition and mainly its opening day are the moments when the communi-

cation between the public and the artist is possible. The show of the entire opening is the main event of the exhibition. At the opening the artist can show his trickster identity or not. He/she can blame the trickster aspects on the artistic imagination, or can make a statement and assume the role of a trickster.

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¹¹ Adorno (2006: 37–38).

¹² Didi-Huberman (2008: 77).

¹³ Danto (1996: 14–30).

¹⁴ Millet (2006: 26–30).

¹⁵ Gablik (2004: 93).

¹⁶ Nenișescu (2008: 21).

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Angry tricks. On Kazimierz Piotrowski's exhibition in the Center of Contemporary Art in Toruń

Rage is the first word of Europe. It is how curator Kazimierz Piotrowski refers in his text on the exhibition *Thymós. The Art of Anger 1900–2011* [*Thymós. Sztuka gniewu 1900–2011*, [ills. 1–2](#)] presented in the Center of Contemporary Art in Toruń in 2011 to German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk. The study of rage in western civilization in his book *Rage and Time* has become a theoretical support for the show. Apart from analyzing the stimulating role of rage in the course of history, Sloterdijk sheds light on rage management or even sublimation in institutionalized forms. In Europe, rage has been captured by political parties and, according to Kazimierz Piotrowski, avant-guard art had its beginnings at the fringes of politics as a natural consequence of the process. In the text, which is a curator's guide to the exhibition, Piotrowski applies chronological caesuras marking the stages in the last century of Polish history. In this order, the curator presents examples of varied artistic disciplines, which raise political or social issues, and the different attitudes they have adopted facing these questions: defending, attacking, promoting, warning, mocking or supporting. The particular and, as it turned out later, key characteristic of the text is the curator's judgmental attitude towards the presented issues (which is clearly stated in the text). It seems to be a consequence of read-

ing Sloterdijk, who draws attention to the fact that rage in contemporary culture has been deprived of its functionality either as an amorphous undirected energy of marginalized social groups or as a trivial pop-aestheticization.

The comments concerning the recent history of Poland which the curator expressed in his text and in the speech for the opening of the exhibition were arbitrary, controversial and have become a polemic against the licensed, liberal, left-wing discourse which defines (in the same arbitrary way) what is progressive and rational, what is true and what is false. It could be treated as an outrageous prank; unacceptable behavior in the temple of contemporary art but then reflections would be replaced by indignation. However, in terms of a pure experiment, the curator's enunciation might be also interpreted as a trick or as a controversial but tempting game.

Peter Sloterdijk analyses the political ways of exploiting rage in European civilization. Therefore, he treats politics as a particular business which manages outbursts of social rage. First of all, Sloterdijk's study categorizes rage, according to Piotrowski. Thus, as an act of rejecting injustice, rage adopts the character of noble passion – the virtue which derives from the classical tradition of *thymós*.



Ill. 1.
The exhibition *Thymós. The Art of Anger 1900–2011* in The Center of Contemporary Art in Toruń, photo: Piotr Litwic, courtesy of the CoCA, Toruń



Ill. 2.
The exhibition *Thymós. The Art of Anger 1900–2011* in The Center of Contemporary Art in Toruń, photo: Piotr Litwic, courtesy of the CoCA, Toruń

Nevertheless, it could become a tool of the cynical lust for power or money and transform into *metis*.

The distinction becomes the axis of the controversial concept of the exhibition. Kazimierz Piotrowski has combined works of art which co-exist in a certain conflict and demand that the reasons for their rage should be verified. Roman Cieślewicz's agitation for creating socialism (*Make Socialism* [*Socjalizm twórz*] 1955), which is, by the way, an example of the high standards of post-war Polish posters, faces a blunt and grotesque answer from Krzysztof M. Bednarski, who reveals the real circumstances of the birth of the red star (*The Birth of the Red Star* (portrait of Karl Marx) – [*Rozdzenie krasnoej gwiazdy / Narodziny czerwonej gwiazdy*

(*portret Karola Marksa*)] 1978–86, *ill. 3*). Totalitarian in their form (according to Walter Benjamin's category), the designs of the monuments by Stanisław Szukalski, which manifest admiration for the idea of a strong national state, find a grotesque comment in the painting by Bronisław Wojciech Linke, which presents the hatred and radicalism of extreme political parties of pre-war Poland (*Two Parties (Today)* [*Dwa obozy (Dzisiaj)*] 1932). In addition, Jerzy Kosalka demonstrates his attitude with an installation which is the product of the distillation process – the obnoxious yellowish solution of rage (*Polish Bile* [*Polska żółć*] 2007, *ill. 4*).

According to Marcin Krasny, the distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable rage only ex-

III. 3.

Krzysztof M. Bednarski, *The birth of the Red Star* (portrait of Karl Marx), 1996, at the exhibition *Thymós. The Art of Anger 1900-2011* in the Center of Contemporary Art in Toruń, photo: Piotr Litwic, courtesy of the CoCA, Toruń



III. 4.

Jerzy Kosałka, *Polish bile*, 2007, object, courtesy of the artist



plains the division of the artists participating in the exhibition.¹ The figure which illustrates the division is the arrangement of the show which refers to the drawing by Stanisław Szukalski presenting two swastikas growing from the common root: one is positive and blooming – a symbol of the fight for freedom; the other one burning with the flame of destruction and slavery. The dark passages resemble a wooden fortification coiled with barbed wire where the works of art adopt the form of the two swastikas split with the red wedge of communism, which is visible when *Thymós* is seen from above, from the balconies of the gallery. The arrangement of the works in the maze of the good and evil swas-

tika is not easy to interpret and it seems that it is not related to the artists' worldview but to the kind of message the artists chose to transmit. As a result, in the passages of the "good" swastika covered with white plastic we can find works of art involved in forming a new strong society whose central figure is Józef Piłsudski. The patriotic affectation is visible in the bust of Piłsudski by Henryk Kuna (1938), which stems from the tradition of the artistic group "Rhythm" ["Rytm"] and in a neo-pagan project, two years older, by Stanisław Szukalski, which shows the marshal as an Aztec god. In the labyrinth of the second swastika covered with black plastic, the Polish catastrophe is represented and announced by the blind *Apocalypse* [*Apokalipsa*] by Gustaw Gwozdecki (circa 1900). The works of art

¹ Krasny (2011).

here document the tragedy in all its dimensions: the national one – in the film by Józef Robakowski *6.000.000* (1962); or the personal one – Wawrzko Sawicki's installation *Der Rabemaler* (2010). The disturbing ambivalence and ambiguity are suspended when we approach the walls constructed in the shape of a red wedge, where examples of Polish socialist realism are presented, such as posters by Mieczysław Berman, Roman Cieśliewicz, Jerzy Jankowski or the painting by Wojciech Fangor *Korean Mother* [*Matka Koreanka*] (1951). The film by Maciej Drygas *Listen to My Scream* [*Usłyszcie mój krzyk*] (1991) functions in contrast to the other pieces of art exhibited here.

It is significant that the works which provoke the deepest emotions are located beyond the labyrinth, outside the conflict. The numerous discourses and problems alter here: criticism of the left-wing elites, sexual identity, national identity or taking a part in the worldview dispute (ill. 5). Here the excess of the experiment with a female body – a film by Alicja Żebrowska *The Mystery is Looking* (1995) – neighbors the photographic documentary of a gay squad in pink balaclavas *The Fag Fighters* by Karol Radziszewski (2007). We can also see the film by the team The Dwarves [The Krasnals] which documents the action when the artists, while pretending to conduct a review, tease the representatives of the Polish artistic establishment at the Venice Biennale in 2011. The documentary shows an attempt to intrude into artistic salons with the help of arrogant persuasion. As a result, only one of the reviewed persons (Dobriła Denegri – director of the Center of Contemporary Art in Toruń) agreed to present the notice “I love The Krasnals” in front of the camera.

The protest against the institutionalization of art faces its authentic helplessness against the context in which it functions. Marcin Berdyszak, who intended to withdraw his work *Correctness* (2010) as a protest against the curator's statements, could do it only symbolically; it was physically impossible to remove the installation according to the spokesperson of the CoCA. The effect seems grotesque; the enormous construction with mannequins' hands carrying black briefcases remains in the same place. The decision of the author is announced by a notice which informs people that the work has been removed from the exhibition and yellow tape prevents visitors from entering the installation.

Organizing the show according to the symbolism of Stanisław Szukalski (whose sense today

seems unclear), Kazimierz Piotrowski defines the narration around the conflict. Contrary to the articles published here and there, the narration is ambiguous and could be interpreted on numerous levels. Moreover, the conflict which is accentuated here is not the product of the curator's obsessive imagination but a phenomenon constantly present in society and, what is particularly important, in the world of art. Thus, it is an outline for the first interpretation of the narration: the exhibition demonstrates the conflict between various forms of the critical involvement of art and artistic actions. Some of them foster the values of the community and aim at reinforcing the identity of the community: in consequence, they demand and postulate. They demand social activity and they are offensive against the dominating discourse. The second strategy fosters an individual identity or the identity of minorities. It applies an affirmative language and speaks on behalf of itself because it cannot, and does not want to, stand for the whole society. It does not demand anything, although it expects changes in the long term; but for the time being it only applies a critical observation. The definitions mentioned in the article resemble the distinctions which have appeared in Polish art criticism – it is enough to mention a book by Jacek Zydorowicz *An Artistic Virus* [*Artystyczny wirus*], which analyses involved and critical art.² The distinction could be equally well transferred to the field of defining critique and criticism as Irit Rogoff did. The critique “involves projecting faults, localizing omissions, allocating guilt” and as such it is placed out of a criticized situation; whereas criticism is aware of being involved in a situation, placed “out of the consensus and confrontation”.³

The long-lasting tradition of the conflict between artistic strategies is documented straightforwardly by the mail-art and happenings presented in the show. While comparing the mail *Contempt* [*Pogarda*] by Andrzej Partum (to be more specific: his *Bureau de la Poesie*, 1975) addressed to Tadeusz Kantor, Wiesław Borowski and others with the leaflets by The Krasnals which associate the names of the Polish artistic establishment with outrageous epithets, the same anarchistic and confrontational character is noticeable (ills. 6–7). In both cases the expression of contempt is clearly detected, but

² Zydorowicz (2005).

³ Rogoff (2005: 118).



Ill. 5.
Jacek Adamas, *TU-SK 154 M*, 2010, object, photo courtesy of the artist

while Partum's action seems acceptable (if the feeling can be valorized), the leaflets of the Krasnals do not.

The divisions, which are illustrated by the concept of Kazimierz Piotrowski, however ambiguous and inexplicit, are successfully manifested in the attitudes of the artists who participated in the show. Some of the artists interpret the curator's statement as an attack against political correctness and have announced their support for the idea of the exhibition, accentuating the certainty of their worldview and calling themselves obscurants – like The Krasnals.⁴ Others have protested against using their works instrumentally to uncover a conspiracy theory in the world of art and politics, and withdraw their works from the exhibition.⁵ Apart from a considerable group of artists who represent historical tendencies and issues of Polish art and are not able to declare their attitude (for objective reasons), other opinions have emerged which outreach the dialectics of the Solidary and indignant. Although Jarosław Modzelewski and Marek Sobczyk understand the reasons why artists have withdrawn their works, they are against the “elimination of space” between a piece of art and a viewer. Under the influence of indignation, artists take away from the viewer a thing which is directed to him – a work of

art.⁶ Although Ryszard Woźniak does not share the curator's views, he has not withdrawn his work but written a letter to the curator, which is displayed next to his work *Flies* [*Muchy*]⁷.

The artists accuse the curator of the instrumentalization of their works and violation of the non-political space of the gallery – in a sense, he lifted the embargo on politics. Both Kazimierz Piotrowski's statement and the reactions to it (predicted by Piotrowski, presumably) proved that the political taboo is fictitious and politics is present either in the space of the gallery or beyond. What hides politics and removes it from the field of view is the fact that artists perform the duty of autonomy and recant their political potential after the years of socialism. It seems to be a funny coincidence or a crafty trick that Kazimierz Piotrowski, organizing the exhibition *Thymós* and his political happening, has actually realized Artur Żmijewski's principles (though the artist does not participate in the exhibition). Overcoming shame and the mechanism of denial, he repeals the prohibition of being political and enables art “to make some expressions legally valid and call others heresy”.⁸ The mechanism, according to Żmijewski, has been exploited for years the other way round. The political happening was

⁴ The Krasnals (2011).

⁵ Bednarski, Berdyszak, Czerepok, Grzyb, Robakowski, Ska, Wasilewski (2011).

⁶ Modzelewski, Sobczyk (2011).

⁷ With some changes published also as a statement, see Woźniak (2011).

⁸ Żmijewski (2007: 7).



III. 6.
The Krasnals, *Whielki Krasnal, Jews!* / Sławomir Sierakowski in the frame of the film by Yael Bartana "Nightmares" during the Biennale in Venice 2011 / from the cycle *Whielcy Polacy* 2011, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm, photo courtesy of the artists



III. 7.
The Krasnals, *The Wailing / Laughing Wall*, 2011, street-art action, photo courtesy of the artists

introduced into the space of artistic actions when some Polish MPs provided help for the sculpture by Maurizio Catellan in 2000 or when Adam Michnik and Renata Beger recorded their conversations with economic or political rivals. Analyzing the manifesto by Artur Żmijewski, who apparently belongs to the mainstream of Polish art, one has difficulty in overcoming the sensation that Kazimierz Piotrowski fulfilled straightforwardly Żmijewski's ideas how to defeat the alienation of art and re-

store its (political) effectiveness.⁹ First of all, Piotrowski, in a perverse way, has reached for the method of "instrumentalization of the autonomy of art"; in this way he has used art as a tool which allows him to overcome "ideological purity" or, to be more precise, ideological blandness. Actually he makes "art to be heard" which, though contrary to political correctness, contributes to promoting and marketing (and I am writing these words without irony) either art or the gallery itself. Secondly, he

⁹ Żmijewski (2007: 7).

enables another of Żmijewski's postulates to come true – a demand to be reviewed by those who are beyond the institutional and professional area of art and are not limited by the narrow expertise of art critics. A piece of art, which no doubt the concept of the curator is, faces a heroic death in the battle against experts in fields other than art history and art criticism. As a result, the causes of a plane crash are analyzed, the patriotic attitude of football fans is discussed and the effects of the bilateral policy of the government with a neighboring country are calculated. Thirdly, and seriously this time, the curator turns the spotlight on the artists who explore social and political problems and are replaced by critics in explaining their intentions with all the power of critics' authority. The curator reinstates the competence of articulating knowledge and opinions on society and politics to artists and their works.¹⁰ As a consequence, numerous artists have published open letters and other statements to express their support for, outrage against, or distance towards the concept of Kazimierz Piotrowski. The example of such a polemic activity might be the letter of Ryszard Woźniak shown next to his work at the exhibition or the letter of Przemysław Kwiek, which corrects the curator's interpretation of his artistic actions and starts with a friendly "Hi, Kazio Piotrowski". However, an outstanding example of the artistic reaction to the exhibition is the intervention of Jerzy Kosalka, who has placed a yellow canister with a notice saying "Piotrowski's bile" under his work "Polish bile".

Kazimierz Piotrowski's project, which includes pieces of art from the borderline of art and some beyond, resembles the concept of the 16th-century and 17th-century cabinets of curiosities *Kunstkammera* where – apart from works of art – archaeological finds, exotic artefacts and curiosities were presented. For those collections, the coexistence of different areas, mutually complementing each other, was liberated from the contemporary requirements of systematization. *Thymós* is composed in a similar way: apart from the works which consequently fight for a good or bad reputation, the curator presents such phenomena as copies of the "Polish Gazette" ["Gazeta Polska"] with outrageous and divulging headlines characteristic of tabloids. The note saying "You read and know more; you listen and become wiser" is a travesty of the title of

a program on the well-known radio station from Toruń, which becomes intriguingly ambivalent if one notices that nearby the video clip by a death-metal rock band Behemoth is being projected exposing Satanist clichés and loud music.

The mix of different orders from which the exhibits derive can become the starting point for coming out of the institutional world of art. However, the situation is not new. It is enough to mention the exhibition *Flowers of Our Lives* [*Kwiaty naszego życia*] presented in CoCA in Toruń in 2008, which explored the problems of collecting (curator: Joanna Zielińska) – nevertheless, Kazimierz Piotrowski seems considerably more radical. The radicalism is expressed also by the fact that the exhibits overcome taboos of political correctness and The Krasnals are not the only ones to be concerned here. We can refer to Alicja Żebrowska, Karol Radziszewski or Katarzyna Górna, who considers three stages of woman's life in her work *Fuck Me, Fuck You, Peace* (2000, work removed from the exhibition). Overcoming the cultural taboo is accomplished with a little pink mascot – *Pink Panther's Crucifixion after Goya* – [*Ukrzyżowanie Różowej Pantery wg Goyi*] by Krzysztof Bednarski from 1981, which one could treat as a grotesque answer to Antonio Saura's crucifixion but others might notice only blasphemy.

In addition to the reference to Peter Sloterdijk, it is worth recalling a certain metaphor which might prove helpful in discovering the curator's intentions. Sloterdijk, incorporating expressions by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, visualizes a crystal palace – an idea of a contemporary, liberal community living in rooms filled with common consensus. In the "gigantic greenhouse", as the German philosopher calls the house, the process of "crystallization of all relations" takes place and "increasing boredom and soft numbness" become foundations of the faith in the end of history.¹¹ Moreover, globalization is developing along with the monopolised discourse and, worryingly, the whole comes closer to the sad vision by Charlie Chaplin in his film *Modern Times*. Alluding to another type of visionary, Sloterdijk refers to Martin Heidegger and claims that "mass culture, humanism, biologism are happy masks which underneath hide a deep boredom of being deprived of challenges". Therefore, a philosophical and punk-like havoc should be provoked,

¹⁰ Żmijewski (2007: 21–23).

¹¹ Sloterdijk (2011: 211–220).

according to Sloterdijk, to crash a glass roof over the head.¹² The concise reference to the metaphor may not fully justify an attempt to apply it in the discussed field but it is worth trying. From this perspective, it can be stated that the art of post historical society has also undergone crystallization and its only ambition is to research phenomena from the comfortable distance of the viewer. Keeping up the pretence of brave statements, art plays *tag* with history. Art expresses ideas in terms of a *crystallized* discourse and later is placed in the crystal rooms of modern galleries, which use their right to favor the ideas which lead to a better future. Kazimierz Piotrowski's exhibition can be treated as a brutal intrusion into the crystal palace of the common consensus by showing the phenomena which comment on history from the perspective of the participants. If you present the human condition with all the humanistic pathos, then I will tell you about it as it should be said – baldly and without sentimentalism (characteristic for political correctness) – this might be Piotrowski's formula for the exhibition. Rage is not only a speechless substance but it has acquired volume (which was emphasized with a loud performance by the band of Jerzy Truszczyński in aesthetics of *noise music*). The *military* arrangement of the exhibition also interferes with the sterility of modern galleries; wooden passages, which resemble fortifications, are decorated with symbols of the swastika and red star, which are forbidden in the world of consensus and tolerance. A person who does not get lost in the trenches might find on his way a sticker by Szukalski a.k.a. "Stach from Warta" with a motif of the "axe-eagle", which was used to mark non-Jewish shops and a Christmas card by Bronisław Wojciech Linke (1938), where the Christmas tree is decorated with presents from Europe to Hitler: Austria, the Sudeten mountains, Spain and Jews. The "documentary" works of art are complementary to the historical narration of the curator and authorize it in a sense. They are not thought-through and aesthetically processed reflections on war and the Holocaust but they confirm the facts in a direct way. It is worth mentioning here the example of the exhibition *History in Art* [*Historia w Sztuce*] which inaugurated the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków (curator: Maria Anna Potocka). The show was closed just before the opening of *Thymós* and against it *Thymós* becomes

an alternative narration. Marcin Krasny, in his critical review of Kazimierz Piotrowski's concept, draws attention to the problem of the Holocaust which has not been raised in the show; simultaneously he refers to the fact that Marta Tarabula and Karol Sienkiewicz point out an overrepresentation of the issue in *History in Art*.¹³ The situation in which the level of political correctness is measured by the number of works on the Holocaust seems ridiculous. As a comment, we can connote the painting by Józef Charyton *Jews Are Demolishing the Statue of Lenin in Siemiatycze* [*Żydzi rozbijają pomnik Lenina na rynku w Siemiatyczach*] (1969), which appears grotesque in this context. Marta Tarabula's critical opinion on the concept of the exhibition by Maria Anna Potocka concerns mainly the possibility of curators' projects promoting and excluding certain topics. In other words, a commonly known diagnosis by Jacques Rancière is confirmed – the natural characteristic of art is its politicality. According to Marcin Krasny, Marta Tarabula has expressed opinions on the exhibition in Kraków which others direct to the exhibition by Kazimierz Piotrowski. Some examples should be quoted here: "simple and predictable political declaration", "history becomes a hostage in a political game" and "memory changes depend on ideology".¹⁴ As a consequence, I would like to express the wish, whose relativist character might not be accepted by some, that we should not be forced to choose the right and the only one among the strategies.

Finally, we should discuss other exhibitions curated by Kazimierz Piotrowski. The first one was the famous *Irreligion* (2001) in Brussels,¹⁵ which was co-curated by Włodzimierz Majewski. The exhibition raised the question of the ways how religious doctrines function in Polish society and spotlighted the oppressive character of institutionalized religions. Running the risk of being marked by the "moral majority", the exhibition did not avoid being anathematized. The most controversial issue was the fact of placing the works of art in two churches (one of them still functioning) and these works were seen by political representatives of the Polish public as blasphemous. The exhibition, according

¹³ Krasny (2011).

¹⁴ Tarabula (2011).

¹⁵ *Irreligion. Morphology of non-sacrum in Polish Art of 19th and 20th centuries* [*Irreligia. Morfologia nie-sacrum w sztuce polskiej XIX i XX wieku*], Atelier 340 Museum in Brussels, 2001–2002.

¹² Sloterdijk (2011: 215).

to Piotrowski's words in the context of *Thymós*, appeared to be a test of tolerance¹⁶ and, as a result, he lost his position of curator in The National Museum in Warsaw. The show appeared to be controversial, which is vividly described in the book by Michał Gorczyca and Michał Kaczyński *You Have Your Critics* [*Macie swoich krytyków*]. They write: "Woźniak decided to show some of his paintings from the 1980s, including the well-known *Abortion* [*Zabieg*] (1982), in a room separated from the others with a white curtain and with a notice saying that the works exhibited there are perceived as controversial.... The intuition of the artist was right and the issue of "controversy" was raised by political loonies and a right-wing hit squad."¹⁷ To be concise, it should be mentioned that the exhibition was accompanied by slogans from which the least harmful seem to be "Woźniak, go to Brussels!" and "No to Freemasonry occupation!"; while after Piotrowski's speech the public asked about his relations to Freemasonry.¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that now the picture *Abortion* by Ryszard Woźniak is presented in *Thymós*.

"I don't know if I may...", that was how Jan Himilbach started the conversation as one of the characters in *Cruise* [*Rejs*] – a film by Marek Piwowski and Janusz Głowacki – when he wanted to ask for permission to change beds in the ship's cabin. As he did not get the answer, he might have complemented his question by saying:

"Free political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia...."

Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, lack, castration, lacuna), which Western thought had so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality....

Don't think that one has to be sad in order to be militant even though the thing one is fighting is abominable....

Don't use your thought to ground a political practice in Truth; nor political action to discredit as mere speculation, a line of thought. Use political practice as an intensifier of thought and analysis as

a multiplier of the forms and domains for the intervention of political action...."¹⁹

Translated by Magdalena Tosik

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¹⁶ Piotrowski (2011: 12).

¹⁷ Gorczyca, Kaczyński (2009: 293).

¹⁸ Gorczyca, Kaczyński (2009: 294–295).

¹⁹ Foucault (2004: XIV–XV).

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Love me – if you don't I will force you! Artist's and curator's strategies on the example of the vernissage exhibition of Izabela Chamczyk in the Artrakt art gallery

„Art is the world's big ear and big eye:
it hears and sees – it is to embarrass, annoy,
and arise the conscience”.

Joseph Conrad

On 15 October 2010, in a contemporary art gallery Artrakt in Wrocław there was a vernissage of an exhibition of Izabela Chamczyk's paintings *Love me!* connected with *Art Attack* action. The action was taken by the artist and the curator of the project, who is the owner of the gallery – Ida Smakosz-Hankiewicz, and provoked much controversy in Wrocław. Chamczyk decided to make people love her art. The participants of the vernissage were closed in the gallery from the outside and she threatened that she would not let them out until at least one painting was purchased (ills. 1–3). The reaction of the guests, as might be expected, was violent and far from positive emotions. The action lasted about 40 minutes and fire brigade and police came to the site. It ended up not only with threats like “I will destroy you!”, but also with losses for the gallery in the form of a broken window which was used by the fire brigade to set the guests free (ills. 4–10). In this way, Chamczyk wanted to start a conceptual game with the viewer, provoking and causing them to react, in both the positive and negative ways. The attitude of the artist fits perfectly

into the characteristics of a trickster – hooligan, bully and cheater. Chamczyk consciously cheats and manipulates, in order to achieve her objectives, to stimulate discussion, not only about art but also about her. In the artistic activities, she often uses her body as a medium of thought projection, often contradicting the stereotype of a fragile, sensitive woman. During the vernissage in the Artrakt gallery, Chamczyk withdrew from the exhibition space, leaving only a video in which she informed about her attack through art. The controversial exhibition, as it turned out, moved and provoked outrage, which was the main intention of the performance organizers.

Did young artist feel like an ear or eye of the world? Did she want to awaken the conscience or shame by her attack? She certainly angered, but also sparked a major debate on the art market, the status of the artist and the meaning of the concept of creating “art for art's sake”.

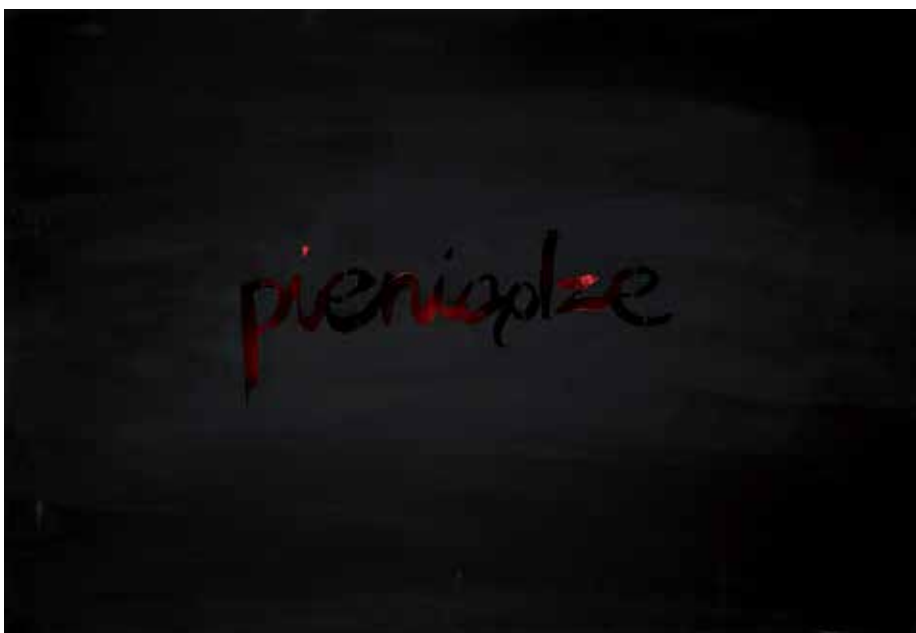
The work of art is often disturbing, irritating and even causing extreme feelings of rage, disgust and pity for the artist. This happens when the limits of so-called decency are exceeded, when the convention of social norms is violated. It's usually very difficult for the recipient who has to face it, as some activities may affect him personally.



III. 1.
LOVE ME!, painting by Izabela Chamczyk, used in an action in the Arttrakt Gallery, Wrocław, acrylic on canvas, 84x148,5 cm composed of parts 21x29,7 cm, 2010



III. 2.
Izabela Chamczyk, *Emergency*, acrylic on canvas, LEDs, 70x100 cm, 2010



III. 3.
Izabela Chamczyk, *No Motive - action*, medium: various, artist's technique, coated paper, 100x70cm, 2010

The action which was undertaken by Izabela Chamczyk was quite bold and innovative, but only in the local environment. This kind of performance, or rather happenings have happened before. Especially in the 60's and 70's when Viennese actionists and all their confreres were chief in the conceptual world of art.

Performance is an art that focuses on the mental and physical side of man, and especially the artist, because the artist is the main content. Performer's body becomes material, a tool, creator, and finally the result, which is a work of art. There is a physical duality – on the one hand it is a working tool to which the creator has to distance themselves, but their physicality is an inherent part of them, so they cannot get rid of it fully¹. The artist must make a de-fragmentation of their personality. The dual role which is played by the body in performance is the main source of tension, energy and thoughts from which comes the final form of performance activity. In the fullest boom of the creative activity of artists such as Marina Abramović, Vito Acconci and Gina Pane, they often created a performance by themselves. Sometimes, they let to involve the recipient in it, to build reciprocal interchange between artist and viewer, thus their mere presence made the operation take on meaning. Today, authors choose a more developed form of performance activities, that is, switching from using one's body to include the actions of real people who are bound to become performers themselves. Such a cooperation may be voluntary, even paid, but most often it is spontaneous, as the viewer becomes forcedly involved in the arranged operation of which he becomes an integral part.

In the 60's and 70's "materiality" of body's use was the evidence of performer's authenticity, their bodily presence, which became a tangible work. Since the 90's that perception of art performance has begun to change. The paradigm of the individual evolved towards community as a social collective. Claire Bishop calls this phenomenon a "shift to authenticity"². An example of such a transformation is the work of Paweł Althamer, who through action tries to convince recipients to perceive the environment more creatively and attentively. In *Observer* performance in 1992, he persuaded a few homeless people from Warsaw to sit in the center,



Ill. 4. Film still from the documentation in the Artrakt Gallery, Wrocław 2010, camera: Mateusz Duzinkiewicz (montage.pl)

in designated areas with an *Observer* plate attached to their clothes, to look on passers-by and the life of the street. The homeless became not only a living and lasting artistic action, but in fact, a kind of art works and advertising at the same time the Warsaw's daily *Observer*. The performance work activities of Althamer oscillate mainly on the cooperation and commitment of ordinary people, often random, neighbors and even the homeless. In the *Bródno 2000* action, he persuaded the inhabitants of one of Warsaw's blocks through the system of switched off and switched on lamps in their homes to create the figure of "2000"³. Art mixed with reality which for the residents of the blocks took a new meaning. Another famous example of his activity is the *Common Task* in 2009, when 150 people, mostly from Bródno (a district of Warsaw) where the artist lives, got dressed in golden suits and flew by golden Boeing to Brussels to celebrate the 20th anniversary

¹ Guzek (2005: 13).

² Bishop (2007: 9).

³ http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-tresc/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/pawel-althamer, viewed on 24 November 2011.



III. 5.
Film still from the documentation in the Arttrakt Gallery, Wrocław 2010, camera: Mateusz Duzinkiewicz (montage.pl)



III. 6.
Film still from the documentation in the Arttrakt Gallery, Wrocław 2010, camera: Mateusz Duzinkiewicz (montage.pl)



III. 7.
Film still from the documentation in the Arttrakt Gallery, Wrocław 2010, camera: Mateusz Duzinkiewicz (montage.pl)

III. 8.
Film still from the documentation in the Arttrakt Gallery, Wrocław 2010, camera: Mateusz Duzinkiewicz (montage.pl)



III. 9.
Film still from the documentation in the Arttrakt Gallery, Wrocław 2010, camera: Mateusz Duzinkiewicz (montage.pl)



III. 10.
Film still from the documentation in the Arttrakt Gallery, Wrocław 2010, camera: Mateusz Duzinkiewicz (montage.pl)



of the fall of communism in Central Europe. The event met with great enthusiasm, Althamer created a golden statue moving in space which even spilled onto the streets and parks of Brussels, at the same time involving thousands of people in his performance. These activities bring a very positive energy. Althamer does not hurt, does not irritate, does not frighten, on the contrary – he makes the reality takes on a new dimension. Each person begins to see uncommonness in the everyday life. The opposite position is taken by the works of an Italian artist, Maurizio Cattelan. He does not intend to entertain anyone, or to be kind to the environment. On the contrary, he insults, teases, is indignant but raises important questions exposing the hypocrisy of politicians, art dealers and ourselves. He spoils the good mood in the contemporary art exposing and ridiculing the art market in which he is somehow stuck. He creates hyper-realistic sculptures primarily to evoke extreme emotions, it is unknown whether it is a joke, pastiche, or maybe a work with so-called hidden “moral”.

In addition to sculptures, Cattelan willingly uses what he is proposed by the surrounding reality. The work *Dynamo Secession* in 1997 shown in the Vienna Secession, was to generate electricity⁴. For this purpose, Cattelan used two museum guards who were sitting in the basement of the gallery and rode their bicycles. Their task was to supply the lighting of the gallery – the bicycles were connected to electric generators which were powered by human muscles. The artist put pressure on the men, because when they stopped pedaling on the exposition got dark and the people did not see anything. Cattelan in some way forced them to do physical work, he made their actions dependent on the opportunity to see the exhibition. Two years later he went even further, at an exhibition in Milan he showed the gallery owner stacked by an adhesive tape to the wall at a height of about 0.5 m above the floor. That well-known gallery owner and art dealer Massimo de Carlo became not only an object, a work of art but also its martyr. Immobilized, he had to hang on the wall, patiently tolerate all those who came to the show. In this way Cattelan wanted to oppose the mechanisms of art market acting, but despite the iconoclastic approach to art, his works are worth millions of dollars, and he is keen on the earnings,

he is aware that people need the performance and reputation. As he says, “I’d rather be attacked than ignored”⁵.

A much more radical artist who made the original concept of performance decline in importance was the Spaniard, Santiago Sierra. The performer ceases to be a typical performer, he has virtually no part in the action, physicality, which still in the 70s was so important, has lost the primary paradigm. Sierra hires people, says what to do and pays them a small daily wage. In his activities he primarily emphasizes economic issues, and the ambivalent value of money. Sierra is a millionaire, but also a staunch anti-capitalist, who lives among Mexican poverty by wealth. He ridicules capitalism, but cannot do without it. Money is central in his work. He shows how easy it is to find people to work, often trivial, and even bordering on the absurd, for very little pay. In 1999, in the work *24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day's work by paid workers* presented in Los Angeles⁶, he does not show the workers, but the viewer was informed about their payment and presence. Sierra wanted to show the “invisibility” of ordinary workers in the society whose work seems to be of little importance, apparently bringing nothing in. But thanks to those invisible hands roads, houses or bridges are built. The project in which paid participants could be seen was *465 paid people* at the Rufino Tamayo Museum (Mexico City), another was *The Corridor of People's House* which was created in the Museum of Modern Art in Bucharest in 2005. Santiago Sierra arranged a corridor of 396 paid beggars and prostitutes put opposite each other. They occupied the space from entrance to exit on a length of 240 m and a width of 120 cm, standing with outstretched hands begging for money in Romanian and English: “give me the money”. The women repeated the words like a mantra for about 3 hours. Sierra wanted to show where the global capitalism was heading, he criticized and ridiculed it. However, his actions could be regarded as hypocritical, because he himself feels fine in the realities of the contemporary art market and is in constant demand by the richest capitalist foundations and art centers.

Santiago Sierra showed a completely new face of performance, uncompromising and brutal, where it

⁴ http://www.secession.at/art/1997_cattelan_e.html, viewed on 24 November 2011.

⁵ Grosenick (2008: 54).

⁶ http://www.santiago-sierra.com/995_1024.php, viewed on 24 November 2011.

is no longer the performer but living human installations that create a masterpiece. More and more often, contemporary artists go towards the construction of a situation where the recipient is not just a spectator but the material and instrument, an inherent part of the performance. This dates back to the happenings of the 70s, when there is a voluntary collaboration of the artist with the society. Ordinary people taking part and satisfying in some way the intention of the artist become a kind of co-authors, not deprived of free will and conscious of the resulting work. This applies both to the women of *The Corridor of People's House* by Sierra and the guards who were forced to pedal a bicycle by Catellán. Perhaps controversial is the so-called 'delegated' performance⁷ when people in accordance with their will or against it are "used" for the creation of art. When they are still paid by the artists as in the case of Sierra, it is easier to agree with such an action, because its participants worked for him freely, and for certain money. But what happens when someone without our knowledge or consent limits our freedom? Physically and mentally? Do then people not become a standard material for the work of an artist?

In 1965, during Tadeusz Kantor's happening *Dividing line* the front door were bricked up. Graciela Carnevale in 1968 closed people from the outside, she limited their freedom, just like Izabela Chamczyk did in Wrocław in 2010. Reactions to Kantor's, Carnevale's and Chamczyk's actions were quite different.

Tadeusz Kantor – stage director, creator of happenings, painter, set designer, writer, art theoretician, actor in his own productions and lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków – was better known as an outstanding and unique personality of the theater of the twentieth century. In the evolution of his staging and aesthetics, Kantor had pushed it to create one of the first Poland's happenings – *Cricotage* and *Dividing line*, both from 1965⁸. Happenings, as Kantor himself wrote, were a product of his previous experiences in the theatre and as a painter: "Up to this point, I have tried to overcome the stage, but now I have abandoned the stage outright; that is, I've abandoned a place

whose relationship with the audience is always well-defined. In searching for a new place, I theoretically had all the reality of life at my disposal"⁹. On 18th December 1965 Kantor's happening *Dividing line* took place in the premises of the Krakow Association of Art Historians. During the happening, previously designated persons of the artistic community, especially painters and art historians, were performing several activities such as: sitting, lying, carrying coal, soaping and shaving, eating pasta from suitcases, making a phone calls, ripping, reading and giving mumbles sentences, holding weights and old junk, wrapping and tearing clothes. These seemingly mundane activities, by pulling them out of context and absurd repetition, gained a new irrational sense. At the same time, Kantor was writing on the board names and institutions associated with the art – on one side those who, according to him, were genuinely associated with the arts, and on the other side those who only feigned it. It was his *Dividing line*. Meanwhile, one of the happenings participants unnoticed by anyone, bricked up the front door. By this, audience and participants of happening, were trapped. Despite of the fact, that the audience had known that something unusual was going to happen, no one expected that they would not be able to get away. It was a scandal. The Krakow Association of Art Historians could be suspended, they also could lose their premises, which they finally avoided. However, unpleasant political repercussions were continued for some time¹⁰.

In October 1968, during the *Experimental Art Series* in Rosario (Argentina) Graciela Carnevale made an action *El encierro* (confinement), during which she imprisoned the audience in a previously prepared room¹¹. Carnevale describes her action as follows: "First, we had to prepare a completely empty room, with totally naked walls; one wall which was made of glass had to be covered, to create an adequately neutral space. The spectators who came to the opening were locked in this room. They were my prisoners. The idea is to let people enter, but prevent them from leaving. [...] There

⁷ Bishop (2007: 9).

⁸ http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-tresc/-/co_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/tadeusz-kantor, viewed on 26 November 2011.

⁹ http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-tresc/-/co_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/tadeusz-kantor, viewed on 26 November 2011.

¹⁰ <http://dekadaliteracka.pl/?id=4365>, viewed on 26 November 2011.

¹¹ <http://www.latinart.com/transcript.cfm?id=91>, viewed on 27 November 2011, also in Graciela Carnevale archive: http://radical.temp.si/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/catalogo_ta.pdf, viewed on 27 November 2011.

is no possibility of escape, in fact, viewers have no choice, are compelled by violence to participate in the action. Positive or negative their reaction, it is always a form of participation. The final result, just as unpredictable to me as to the public, however, is intentional; will the viewers reconcile with the situation and remain passive? Or will they break the glass?¹² The reaction of the audience disappointed the artist, as they remained passive and did nothing. The glass window was covered by posters so that the trapped audience would not see anything. After an hour they tore the posters down, but no one took an action to release the group. It was not until a person from the outside broke the window and the audience could get out. Surprisingly, some were angry that someone dared to destroy a work of art, a man was attacked and even got a few punches by umbrella¹³. The people located in the trap at first thought that the situation was staged, that something would happen, or just somebody would release them. When it turned out that nothing happened, satisfaction gave way to frustration, but not strong enough for any action to be taken. The action ended when the police intervened¹⁴. They suspected that the event was related to the first anniversary of the arrest of Che Guevara¹⁵. Carnevale sought to unleash a liberating violence in response to the violence she herself was exercising as a metaphor for the opposing forces in the capitalist system¹⁶. Upon exiting, the audience was given a statement that drew a correlation between the experience they had undergone and other abusive acts perpetrated by the Argentine military government on a daily basis¹⁷. In 2007 Graciela Carnevale was invited to participate in "Documenta 12" in Kassel, during which she presented installation of archival photos and materials from the action of *El encierro* and from the project *Tucumán Arde* (Tucumán is burning)¹⁸.

¹² Bishop (2007: 10).

¹³ Bishop (2007: 10).

¹⁴ <http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=27&wid=183&e=t&v=&a=&t=>, viewed on 26 November 2011.

¹⁵ Bishop (2007: 10).

¹⁶ <http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=27&wid=183&e=t&v=&a=&t=>, viewed on 26 November 2011.

¹⁷ <http://uncertain.empac.rpi.edu/artists/carnevale/>, viewed on 26 November 2011.

¹⁸ <http://www.latinart.com/transcript.cfm?id=91>, viewed on 12 November 2011. Graciela Carnevale (born 1924, Argentina) was a member of the Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia

Carnevale's performance proceeded in a quite gentle way, with big amount of distance. Also Kantor's audience was more polite than the establishment. The gallery crowd was even more frightened of the situation than threatening to the artist. It was quite different in the case of the *Art Attack* action by Izabela Chamczyk. Here decidedly the artist was an enemy of the audience. If she did not sneak out from the gallery, she would be in a serious danger.

On 15 October 2010 at the Arttrakt Gallery in Wrocław, LOVE ME exhibition was held which was opened by the action of ART ATTACK. The insert that came with the invitation was:

"The Arttrakt Gallery along with the artist Izabela Chamczyk have the pleasure to invite you to an exhibition of paintings LOVE ME! The exhibition will be opened by ART ATTACK action which is an artistic provocation. Start: 15/10/10 at 18.00 in the Arttrakt Gallery in Wrocław, 1/1 Ofiar Oświęcimskich street.

Together with the artist we want to demonstrate what mechanisms operate on the art market, we want to move, shake, and force to act. At the LOVE ME! exhibition Art will take control over you. Please be ready for some real ART ATTACK!

On Friday evening after crossing the threshold of the Arttrakt gallery there may be no return. Do you wish to take this step and dare with full consciousness to enter the private property of art? Be warned, we'll force you to love... love for the art!

Enter at your own risk, which is equivalent with the decision to participate in the ART ATTACK action."

As it follows from the above flyer, the artist as well as the gallery owner warned honestly people willing to participate in the exhibition that something would happen, and if they decided to participate in the exhibition at the same time they decided for an art attack. When the audience gathered in the gallery and saw the opening of the exhibition, the artist with the gallery owner locked the gallery from the outside. At that moment, a previously prepared by Chamczyk video recording was shown. She informs in it that the gallery was closed from the outside and no one will come out until at least one picture has been purchased. The price of each painting was 3000 zlotys, although she was aware of the fact that not everyone was prepared for such an

de Rosario, a collective that created a complete upheaval in the local art scene from 1965 until it disbanded in 1969.

expense, and therefore one of the pictures had been divided into 20 parts, so each of them cost 150. In this case the cooperation of the gallery visitors was needed in order to buy all the elements. Chamczyk said on the recording that she wanted to “force them to real, painful love that requires some sacrifices.” The title painting of the exhibition “Love me!”, divided into pieces, portrayed the artist striking a man in the face. This can be referred to the whole situation of the *Art Attack*. The only question is who gets it in the face, the artist or her recipients? Is the artist mocking her audience or the viewers’ ignorance is a slap in the artist’s face? This shows difficult and unrequited love. The other paintings being on display also highlighted different aspects of love as well as referred to the emotions that the locked in guests of the exhibition had to deal with. On the minimalist paintings there were subtitles: a sense of security, powerlessness, trust, hysteria, but also a very clearly written word “money”, which appeared and disappeared highlighted in red. As a warning, an alarm. Chamczyk makes it clear that she wants to be loved, to make her paintings noticed and she is not ashamed that she wants to make money on it. If she is not able to live from painting, she will take another job and then betray her art. She will not be able to devote herself to it without limits, and she does not want to create after hours. The Wrocław feedback was extremely different from the reaction of the audience in Kassel. In the Arttrakt gallery clamor rose immediately, aggression among the participants increased even more when they realized that neither she nor the owner of the gallery were inside (payments for the bought picture or parts of it were to be made to Mr Grzegorz Smakosz, appointed by the exhibition curator earlier). Izabela Chamczyk explains her absence in this way: “If I had been inside, people would have attacked me, above all they would have expected me to release them and to provide explanations, and here it was not an explanation but their co-reacting which was meant – how they would manage without my participation.”¹⁹ The reaction was very lively. Verbal abuse, insults and profanity began to be hurled. Only a few people approached the action with a distance, pleased with waiting for further developments. Tension continued to grow, people were shouting louder and louder, threatening to destroy Chamczyk and Smakosz-Hankiewicz. Some-

one called the police and fire department. Finally, one of the participants broke the gallery’s window and people began to leave the temporary “prison” down the ladder (the gallery windows are on the mezzanine floor). Then the originators of the project appeared and unlocked the door of the gallery. “The prisoners” met with their “executioner”. Some were thankful for the amazing experiences and congratulated the artist her ideas, others shouted and threatened her²⁰. Izabela Chamczyk decided on a very bold step. She committed a manipulation on people who against their will and by force became not only the part of her posted performance, but in fact they were her co-authors. On the example of the Tadeusz Kantor’s *Dividing line*, Graciela Carnevale’s *El encierro* and Izabela Chamczyk’s *Art Attack* we can notice the different responses to imprisonment. Different emotion can be triggered – from fear, by restraint, up to aggression. For each of these actions came art-aware recipients, no one came there by accident. However, their behavior was conditioned by different contexts, embedded in the political and economic situation of the countries. Despite appearances, *Art Attack* which took place in 2010, at a time of economic and political freedom, had triggered the most aggressive reactions. Sudden involuntary slavery, restriction of freedom for most people, raises fears linked to aggression. As a matter of fact, no one has the right to detain us, and restrict our freedom. More importantly, no one can force us to love art, love is always voluntary. Chamczyk perversely wanted to force people to love her art, although from the very beginning she knew that it was not possible. She counted on the fact that she might achieve the opposite effect, because the line between love and hate is very thin. She took this risk in the name of art, to which, as she emphasizes, she is entirely dedicated. She wants to treat her profession seriously, she wants to devote herself to it and expects something in return – the possibility of living on it. By her action she wanted to draw attention to the difficult life of every young artist. Art very rarely brings tangible financial benefits. People come to the vernissage primarily to meet with the artist and friends, to drink wine and finally to see art (though not always), and they

¹⁹ Pilipionek (2011: 278).

²⁰ More information about the exhibition can be found at <http://www.arttrakt.pl>, and the documentary video from the exhibition at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSZMjR4J7Is>, viewed on 26 November 2011.

almost never buy anything. Exhibitions are often just another entry in the dossier of artists who if they did not get scholarships and family support, they would not be able to support themselves. The situation is not any better in commercial galleries which very often do not exhibit what is good in art but what has a chance to be sold. The problem of the art market, how it functions was already raised by Izabela Chamczyk earlier. As a fourth-year student of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław she organized an *Redundant art* action (2008) through which she wanted to highlight the problem of “over production” of art. Paintings were lying at different people’s homes, which she soon had to take back. Because the galleries had not been selling paintings, their number increased instead of decreasing. Art came to be redundant, interfered and took space. She decided to give away for free her canvases to various cultural institutions in Wrocław, like art galleries and museums. Chamczyk, like a “desperate mother” wrote an official letter with a list of places where her paintings would be “planted like unwanted children.”²¹ Of course, she encountered resistance, because for the museum it should be a gift that must be formally accepted with the status of inventory, but what for? Museums have their storerooms full anyway, and galleries? They are often limited in space, too, plus the uncertainty of whether this Chamczyk would not want something in return? Both the actions organized by the artist showed her desperation, the struggle for beliefs, ideas to which she tries to be faithful. She fights to make someone love her art, really and sincerely, without compromise and conditions.

An economic motive, which she is not ashamed of, appeared again in 2009. In the video *Art after hours* Chamczyk has a plastic bag put on her head, in which she breathes, but slowly the oxygen is about to finish. Along with the ending air there are shrinking funds being calculated on the screen. In this way she emphasizes that, as much as we need oxygen to survive, we also need money. Without it, not only artists but each of us will not be able to survive. The problem taken up by her does not only relate to herself but a wide range of young artists who have a problem with existing on the art market. The *Art Attack* action is a continuation of recurring economic problems. Some accuse Cham-

czyk that her paintings should defend themselves, that she should not ask for attention and money. But doesn’t every artist call for attention? After all, a work without the recipient does not function, it is redundant. The performance which the artist prepared was an event which could not have been planned, it was a constructed situation which was developing freely without the artist’s interference. Significantly, in an interview with Katarzyna Piliponek, to the question what she achieved as an artist after the exhibition in the Arttrakt gallery Chamczyk replied: “At first, the experience of working on people”²². Not “with” people but “on” them. This demonstrates the subjectivity that the guests of the exhibition assumed, as they became a “living material” of work for the artist, as in Sierra or Carnevale. This raises the question of whether such a conduct is ethical? Is it appropriate? What Chamczyk did meet in the Wrocław environment with tremendous criticism and indignation, and the artist herself was hailed as a scandalmonger²³. In this case, we can refer to the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) who dealt with art as a “social recognition”²⁴. He stressed that art is not only a private fantasy, but that it belongs to the public stage of the history of culture, “no proper evolution of sublimation in art is possible if we overlook the fact that every artistic production, especially that belonging to fine arts, is placed in history”²⁵. In addition, he stressed that in his opinion it is a better art which does not provide a nice entertainment but irritates, shocks and calls our identity into question. One of the foundations of ethics of Lacan is the rejection of what the majority in the society regards ethically appropriate. According to him, a truly ethical behavior involves taking full responsibility for one’s own actions, at the same time one should be loyal to one’s unconscious personal desires. This does not mean giving up responsibility towards others but taking the responsibility for what we believe to be appropriate and necessary, without a sense of security provided in social convention²⁶. The activities of Izabela Chamczyk

²² Piliponek (2011: 277).

²³ http://wroclaw.gazeta.pl/wroclaw/1,35771,8519857,Artystyczny_terror_we_wroclawskiej_galerii_ArtTrakt.html, viewed on 28 November 2011

²⁴ D’Alleva (2008: 117), more about J. Lacan: J. A. Miller (1998), Žižek (2008), Roudinesco (2005), Burzyńska (2006).

²⁵ D’Alleva (2008: 117–118).

²⁶ Bishop (2007: 12).

²¹ The full letter can be found at <http://zbednasztuka.prv.pl/>, viewed on 26 November 2011.

fit perfectly in the Lacanian ethics – they show consistency, fidelity to herself, to her convictions. Undertaking the *Art Attack* she knew that she was taking a great risk, that committing manipulation by allowing the manipulation and “working on people” she would be rejected, excluded and not loved. However, this did not prevent her, because Chamczyk’s subconscious desire to move the economic problem in art was stronger and ethically appropriate. This explains the “desperate” gesture towards the recipient, to make them finally love her, if not voluntarily, then under duress. Izabela Chamczyk, by her attitude and work is a part of a trickster archetype who annoys, provokes, leads to discussion, goes beyond limits, because, as we know, without it world doesn’t go round.

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In Between Different Domains and Spaces

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Trickster strategies in critical design

Tricksters are thought to appear in the contexts where there are dialectical structures based on internal contradictions and weaknesses that, ultimately, contribute to their systemic decay. When trickster figures fulfill their aims they tend to dissolve in the realm of everyday routine, waiting for some new challenges confirming their indispensability in constantly evolving human societies.¹

One can argue whether there are certain preconditions determining the occurrence of trickster strategies, such as the construction of a coherent system that could be analyzed with the use of a set of academic criteria, defining its constitutive elements as good or bad, beneficial or disadvantageous. The presence of such academic procedures in the trickster discourse does not diminish its significance for the process of creating effective tools enabling the so called victims that are snared into various traps to develop some defensive behaviors so as to defeat the threats coming from the civilized environments.

Trickster strategies, the defining feature of which is engaging humor and mockery as the tactics of resistance and protest, seem to characterize the position worked out by Anthony Dunne, professor and head of Design Interactions Department

at the Royal College of Art in London, in cooperation with Fiona Raby, a partner in the design partnership Dunne&Raby, established in 1994. The term *critical design* may be understood as a kind of continuation of the anti-design movement initiated by postmodern designers active in the late 1960s and 1970s, though as such it was first elaborated by Dunne in his book *Hertzian Tales* published in 1999.² The author describes products that are called by him para-functional because of their going “beyond conventional definitions of functionalism to include the poetic”.³ He explains the exact meaning of the term while commenting Jack Kevorkian’s *Suicide Machine*. According to Dunne’s interpretation, Kevorkian’s device, used by the doctor to assist his patients in dying, can be seen as “a powerful “unofficial” design that materializes complex issues of law, ethics, and self-determination, shows how an industrial invention can be a form of criticism”.⁴ The role of such an instrument in the process of changing social and cultural norms might be even greater than the one triggered by artistic performances because “its ambiguous status between prototype and product makes it more dis-

¹ Compare: Hyde (1998: 3–16).

² Dunne (1999).

³ Dunne (1999: 43).

⁴ Dunne (1999: 43).

turbing than pure artworks by blurring boundaries between the everydayness of industrial production and the fictional world of ideas.”⁵

Tracing back the strategy one may discover that critical products have a long history. In the early 1970s a Polish designer Krzysztof Wodiczko constructed a strange looking *Vehicle* in the form of a four-wheeled mobile platform (a sort of a treadmill) to function as a metaphor for the then underdeveloped industrial sector in Poland. Whenever a person steps onto the treadmill (a remake exhibited in the Contemporary Art Museum in Łódź, Poland, 1996) trying to move the vehicle forward it is put into reverse showing the true direction of the industrialization, contrary to the socialist regime’s propaganda claims. Working as a designer in the Central Offices of Industrial Design in Warsaw, as well as in the Unitra Electrical Works Corporation and the Polish Optical Works he knew all the weaknesses of the production procedures typical of the communist countries from the Soviet Bloc. Exploring the relationship between art and civilization in 1971 Wodiczko wrote:

“An Artist often creates the human environment in collaboration with other specialists such as engineers, scientists and so on. Simultaneously with other artists he can discover new or forgotten needs unnoticed by people active in vast multitude of creative potentials. This is how I understand the role of an artist – engaging in the protection of the human environment.”⁶

On recalling his early projects the designer stated that the seeds of his critical activity could be found in his de-constructivist works realized in Warsaw. The *Vehicle*, constructed with the help of Foksal Gallery and publicly shown in Warsaw in 1972, was propelled forward through a system of gears and cables by a person perpetually walking back and forth on its tilting top surface. It was supposed to transform the conventional back-and-forth pacing associated with intellectual reflection or with being stymied into forward movement related to the official notion of progress.⁷

After his immigration to the United States Wodiczko proposed his most famous project: the construction of a special *Vehicle for The Homeless* in New York. His aim was to start a debate on

what he would call the nomadic life within a contemporary urban space. Alerted by the news about 70 000 homeless people in New York he decided to do something to break down the wall of silence around the neglected city population. As he was explaining:

“The shelter vehicle attempts to function usefully in the context of New York City street life. Therefore, its point of departure is the strategy of survival that urban nomads presently utilize. Through discussions with scavengers, we developed a proposal for a vehicle to be used both for personal shelter and can and bottle transportation and storage. An earlier design was shown to potential users and modified according to their criticisms and suggestions.”⁸

The vehicles designed by Wodiczko belong to the same group as the contemporary objects offered by Dunne and Raby. Bill Moggridge, the co-founder of the Silicon-Valley-based design firm IDEO and the director of the Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum in New York described the works of the London couple as “something beyond the obvious functionality of the consumer product: they look for more complicated pleasures that hover on the border of the subversive and artistic, but always offering comment on humanity.”⁹ There is a noticeable similarity between the comments delivered in the writings by Wodiczko and the statements issued by Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby announcing that their main interest lies in using design as a medium, to ask questions and provoke the public. Being aware of the new conditions determining the designing procedures where the creative activity is no more stimulated by the idea of optimizing previous technological achievements Dunne and Raby concentrate on the combination of various disciplines – from anthropology and architecture to computer science, fine art – to develop a more human approach to designing strategies. They look at the aesthetic and functional potential of new technologies by playing with them and experimenting with solid as well as virtual models in order to find out whether the implemented solutions fit into some preexisting social, cultural and economical standards.

Inspired by a meat-eating robot developed at the University of South Florida Dunne and Raby

⁵ Dunne (1999: 43).

⁶ After Sienkiewicz (2010).

⁷ Wodiczko (1999: 156).

⁸ Wodiczko (1999: 82).

⁹ Moggridge (2007: 591).



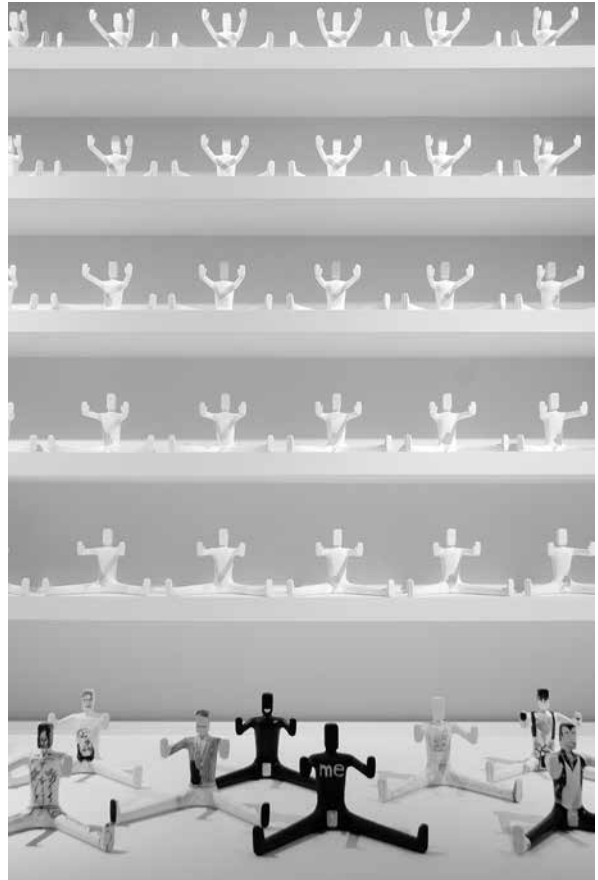
Ill. 1. Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, *Teddy Bear Radio*, 2005, photo: Kristof Vrancken, copyright Dunne&Raby



Ill. 2. Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, *Evidence dolls (1)*, 2005, photo: Kristof Vrancken, copyright Dunne&Raby

decided to explore the concept of using animal and blood products as a source of energy. They made an FM radio that uses a blood bag in the shape of a teddy bear to power it (ill. 1). Although they were trying to apply some principles of consumer-friendly design to make the product acceptable they had serious doubts about the chances of a successful launch or marketing in this case as they were afraid of some culturally or even religiously conditioned prejudices.

Another project realized by Dunne and Raby as a part of their tutorial practice was called *Evi-*



Ill. 3. Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, *Evidence dolls (2)*, 2005, photo: Kristof Vrancken, copyright Dunne&Raby



Ill. 4. Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, *Evidence dolls (3)*, 2005, photo: Kristof Vrancken, copyright Dunne&Raby



Ill. 5.
Revital Cohen, *Life Support*
– *dialysis sheep*, copyright
Revital Cohen



Ill. 6.
Revital Cohen, *Life Support*
– *ventilation dog*, copyright
Revital Cohen

dence Dolls (ills. 2–4). It explored the influence of genetic engineering on our habitual behavior. Basing on interviews carried out with four women who had been recalling their relationships with a quite impressive number of lovers, a hundred plastic dolls were prepared to serve as special containers for collecting samples of genetic material representing required features of character as well as the ones associated with physical attractiveness. A black indelible marker was provided to note down some interesting characteristics observed by women during the love affairs. The dolls were equipped with three small drawers that could be slid into the seated figure's groin area. They were distinguished by three different penis sizes forming the drawers' handles.

Generally, the Evidence Dolls are thought to encourage the viewers to consider the nature of love, sex and romance.¹⁰ They were exhibited in Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2005.

Going the same direction as her teachers from RCA a young designer Revital Cohen invents critical objects and elaborates provocative scenarios exploring the juxtaposition of the natural and the artificial. Collaborating with scientists and medical consultants she investigated the possibility of establishing a natural symbiosis of animals transformed into medical devices with human patients that would rely on them (ills. 5–6). Presenting the

¹⁰ Robb (2008: 50–53).

III. 7.
Revital Cohen, *Artificial Bio-
logical Clock*, copyright Re-
vital Cohen



III. 8.
Marti Guixé, *HiBYE*, photo:
Inga Knölke, Copyright
© Imagekontainer Knölke



main idea of her project entitled *Respiratory Dog* Revital explains:

“A pedigreed greyhound is bred by the racing industry. Like his purebred parents, he has long, powerful legs, hypoallergenic fur and a large chest capacity. He will spend the first twelve months of his life being trained to chase a lure. Over the next three to five years the dog spends his days at kennels and is taken racing weekly to make profit for its owners. By the age of five, or earlier, the greyhound retires from the racetracks. Instead of being euthanised (a fate thousands of retired greyhounds

suffer each year), the dog is collected by the NHS and goes through complimentary training in order to become a respiratory assistance dog. When training is completed, the greyhound is adopted by a patient dependent on mechanical ventilation. It then begins its second career as a respiratory ‘device’. The greyhound and its new owner develop a relationship of mutual reliance through keeping each other alive.”¹¹

¹¹ Cohen (Life...).



Ill. 9.
Marti Guixé, *HiBYE*, photo:
Inga Knölke, Copyright
© Imagekontainer Knölke

The description is accompanied by a set of questions formulated by the author rhetorically asking whether humans would become parasites and live off another organism's bodily functions. Even more shocking is Revital's idea of implanting the electrocyte appendix into the body to allow people to produce electricity. One can imagine the consequences of such procedures, with people replacing the generators of a power plant in order to earn money for their living. It is evident that Cohen's concepts reflect the most crucial concerns of our time, ranging from transgenic transplantation through energy crisis to reproductive technologies. Her *Artificial Biological Clock* (ill. 7) is a special device that compensates for women's lost procreation instinct:

"The object acts as constant reminder of the temporary and fragile nature of fertility. Given to a woman by her parents or partner, it reacts to information from her doctor, therapist and bank manager via an online service. When she is physically, mentally and financially ready to conceive the object awakes, seeking her attention."¹²

The device is supposed to bring a solution to the ever growing problem of women resigning from participation in the reproductive cycle because of their devotion to professional career making. The difficulties caused by the necessity of coping with the inconveniences of modern forms of nomadic life, conditioned by flexibility and the organiza-

tional *modus operandi* based on constant travelling in search for new places of work, inspired Marti Guixé to design *HiBYE* pills (ills. 8–9). Working as a self-employed designer Guixé is forced to accept the nomadic routine typical of people who come to a certain place to do their job for a very short period and soon after they have managed to greet their co-workers with *Hi* they will have to leave their new acquaintances saying the sacramental good-bye. To help people get accustomed to constant changes the Spanish designer developed pharmaceutical units used to facilitate relaxation, concentration, being friendly, inventing brilliant ideas etc. The concentration pill is inedible and hard. It is intended to be rolled around in the mouth in moments requiring total attention toward something. The relaxation pill, instead, is soft and contains a herbal tranquilizer putting us in a good mood.¹³

Though Dunne emphasizes the difference between artworks and design models claiming that the latter tend to form a direct relation with everyday life practices, critical design has little to do with activities resulting in the massive production of consumer goods. Not only works designed by the London-based duo but also those invented by their former students or colleagues by profession exist merely as exhibits shown in museums and galleries so that their functioning resembles the tactics typical of entrepreneurship schemes applied by art-

¹² Cohen (*Artificial...*).

¹³ Antonelli (2001: 214).

ists. Evidence dolls, biological clocks or HiBye pills have the same ontological status as the Universal Penis Expander, Blood drops, Ken's Aunt or Birth Bed designed by the Polish artist Zbigniew Libera. The aim of such works is fulfilled the moment they enter the discourse and provoke the debate encouraging designers, producers or simply the public perceiving art to cross boundaries posed by traditional systems of values. This makes the objects operate as baits of the mythical trickster figures ending their activity immediately after they have turned into experts at unmasking deceptions and escaping the traps that might be disturbing the processes of human adaptability necessary for working out modern, holistic and future-oriented strategies for survival.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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"Trick" and "click" – Peter Eisenman's design strategies

On 17 November 1982, at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University a debate took place between Christopher Alexander, an eminent teacher of architecture associated with the University of California at Berkeley, and Peter Eisenman, who was then finishing his career of the director of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, co-founded by him. In their discussion on the concept of harmony in architecture, which later would be called a legendary one and printed in various magazines, Christopher Alexander, an advocate of the theory of the existence of immutable values in architecture, accused his interviewee of not less than "fucking up the whole profession of architecture"¹, what probably had a connection with his deep respect for the Catholic Church. The love of harmony and the culture accumulated in Catholicism certainly can be traced in this statement of Alexander. Eisenman could only awkwardly defend himself saying that he did not understand why Alexander felt the need of harmony, which he did not feel. He asked also: „Why does he feel the need for harmony, and I do not? Why does he see incongruity as irresponsible, and why does he get angry? I do not get angry when he feels the need for harmony. I just feel I have a different

view of it.”² Even if – he said a moment later – most people feel the need of harmony, those who derive pleasure from incongruity and disharmony should be also tolerated. No doubt it can be stated that in this dispute Alexander was right and Eisenman was not. The problem is, however, that a so-understood “right” has its basis in a whole system of prejudices and superstitions and their important source is acting for social cohesion. A part of such behavior is precisely the suppression of reflection on the sources of such concepts as reason and harmony. But when it is impossible to question the existence of social change, a discussion becomes inevitable on the concepts crucial not only for the very existence of society, but also its survival. For the initial occurrence of any social organization it is necessary to reduce doubt, for its survival – to allow that doubt. As Leszek Kolakowski put it: a cult of obviousness (the attitude of a priest) must be accompanied by a cult of non-obviousness (the attitude of a clown). “The Philosophy of clown is the one which, in every age, denounces as doubtful, what is considered to be firm, reveals the contradictions of what seems to be self-evident and indisputable, exposes the obviousness of common sense to ridicule, detects a sense in absurdities – in brief, it takes the daily

¹ Lotus (1983: 67).

² Lotus (1983: 67).

effort of a professional clown with the inevitable risk of ridicule; depending on where and when, the thought a fool can navigate through all extremes of thinking, for today's sanctities were paradoxes yesterday, and absolutes from the Equator are often blasphemies at the Pole."³

Eisenman acted with full consciousness of this kind of attitude. In his summary of the collaboration with Derrida he wrote: „A trickster, according to C.G. Jung, is a complex, archetypal character. It has both positive and negative connotations. In the negative sense it is a person who is always playing games, who cannot face reality. For Jung it has qualities of the eternal boy. On the psychologically positive side, a trickster is one who when confronted with power is able to undermine through guile the force on the power, to divert or subvert it without direct confrontation.”⁴ Directly after Jung it should be added that the most frightening feature of the trickster is his ignorance – otherwise: his inability to recognize what is familiar.⁵ In his work, which pass many different phases, Eisenman used very different strategies (and tricks) that separated him from both the most basic principles of architecture, and from the modernist tradition. Fascinating is the fact that despite all efforts with the “click”, well-known throughout the art, Eisenman, who, in infinitely many ways, sought to reject the entire existing architecture, remained an architect, and the architecture remained intact. It did not even become ugly!

The first period of Eisenman's work was dominated by ideas of modernism and attempts to separate the major components of architectural work from their previous meanings and uses. Architecture was to become autonomous from the extensive symbolic systems, but also to reveal its components which make it distinct from other fields. With this approach, the traditional definitions of architecture had to be questioned. *Firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas* did not make the architecture a separate field. Essentialization and autonomization of a set of characteristics of this discipline required research and critical treatment, which could specify a set of verified components. Some of these treatments – according to critics such as K. Michael Hays⁶ and

Rosalind Krauss⁷ could be associated with the term “defamiliarization” – once formulated by Victor Szklowski. In the early work of Eisenman, mainly in objects known as *House I* and *House II*, efforts to produce in users a sense of estrangement from buildings inhabited by them consisted in interfering with customary places of occurrence of typical components, their displacements, deficiencies or excesses. In such use, typical construction elements “struck in the eyes”, become “opaque” as theorists of modernism, Clement Greenberg and Colin Rowe wanted. These actions met with some paradoxes described by Eisenman: „To distinguish architecture from building requires an intentional act – a sign which suggests that a wall is doing something more than literally sheltering, supporting, enclosing; it must embody a significance which projects and sustains the idea of “wallness” beyond mere use, function, or extrinsic allusion. Thus its paradoxical nature: the sign must overcome use and extrinsic significance to be admitted as architecture; but on the other hand, without use, function, and the existence of extrinsic meaning there would be no conditions which would require such an intentional act of overcoming”.⁸

A description of this paradox corresponds to the effects of Trickster's action: the system has been challenged, but not overthrown, while the author also exposed himself to questioning (ridicule). Eisenman's behavior, even after years, was taken by eminent critics – such as Charles Jencks – doubtfully. In an interview with Eisenman Jencks repeatedly returned to the matter unfunctionality of Eisenman's houses and did not accept the explanation that “is a difference between being anti-functional, and being against making function thematic”.⁹ The Houses – despite the obstacles – are suitable to live, but clearly break away from the meanings and uses ascribed to them by tradition. Characteristic tricks for them was the use of deficiency and excess in shaping them. In *House I* there is a pillar jutting on the balcony and not supporting anything. In *House II* a support system is dense more than real needs. In each of these two cases it is shown a component of architecture dissected from its references to meanings and functions. Operations performed on the houses numbered from I to IV were defined

³ Kołakowski (1989: 178).

⁴ Eisenman (2007: 78).

⁵ Jung (1977: 472).

⁶ Hays (1994: 105).

⁷ Krauss (1987:166).

⁸ Eisenman (1979: 127).

⁹ Jencks (1988: 50).

by the architect by the term "cardboard architecture", which revealed a growth of awareness of his own doings.

In constructing these objects, Eisenman properly observed architecture, which was another requirement posed by theorists of modernism. The term "cardboard architecture" discovered the existence of architecture outside of the "theory – practice" scheme, as a game or a variation on a prefigured system. This position signaled his increased interest in contemporary linguistic theories.

A period of Eisenman's work, which can be defined as a "linguistic" or "structuralist", might be divided into two phases: the first, which was aimed at the disclosure of rules of conduct in the architecture and the second, in which he tried to uncover rules ruling the rules. In the first phase, you can still feel the impact of Colin Rowe, in the second one – of Noam Chomsky. The first phase is well represented by a procedure used in *House III* (1969–1971) and *House IV* (1971), but its remains can be found in a subsequent theoretical work: the article "The Futility of Objects – and the Decomposition Processes of Difference (1984)¹⁰ and the book *Giuseppe Terragni: Transformations, Decompositions, Critiques* (2003)¹¹. In all these works, through a sequence of drawings it is illustrated the procedure of composing the project by moving lines and turning planes or solids. Series of drawings were made so as to blur the authorship of a particular author, to make the impression that it was made by a machine. The dependence of the effect on transformations not subjectively controlled is shown, but at the same time it is identified a process of formation of the project as a kind of pure architecture. Moving any line parallel to the left or the right from a starting position always creates a system, regardless of aesthetic preparations of a maker. Thus, a maker is only a tool of capabilities generated by the system itself. An incentive for research and projects, in which a driving force of the system itself was revealed and a role of the author diminished, was the inspiration derived from writings of Chomsky. Further clarification of Eisenman's action might be provided by a statement – based on the thesis of transformation-generative grammar – claiming that the semantics of Eisenman's projects results from the transformation made on so-called deep

syntactic structures. "Eisenman's concern was with the building as a manifestation of a system of relationships, that is, with the architectural system as a generator of form as well as meaning. Syntax is then seen as a generative or transformational process, not only as a system of visual relationships."¹²

Noticing that external symptoms of a project depend on deeper coded rules might also have an impact on his interest in other contexts of architecture, whose recovering, however, required to go beyond the logic of modernism. At this stage, Eisenman noticed limitations imposed by the principle of autonomy of a work, but also contradictions inherent in the very principle. Autonomy turn out to be a rule conditioned by a particular theory of art, and thus an attitude impossible to apply. All kinds of Eisenman's achievements in the field of architecture depended, after all, on its own theoretical statements, followed by statements of his critics, but above all on the very argument about the possibility of dissection of an autonomous architecture. This argument would make sense only if principles of architecture were not assessed for their reasonableness, and thus for belonging to the predefined metaphysical rules of and political structures. The social position of the architect was always inferior, and attempts of creating an aura of independence does not change it. The real position of the architect recalls the myth of Trophonius and Agamedes who had an access into the royal treasury (power) only through a trick.¹³

The spectacular part of Eisenman in the theater of architecture (power), especially his media image extended almost to the position of a show-business star, was another trick by which he violated the system of separation of powers. However looking at photographs of the architect presenting him with his inseparable bow-tie we can state a refined one but still clowning. Both the artistic and political resistance became at that time a better and better selling item on the art market and preserved what was to remove.¹⁴

A next area of resistance in the activities of Eisenman was questioning the principles of architecture at the level of metaphysics. The main source of inspiration, in this regard, was the philosophy of deconstruction. Eisenman assimilated its con-

¹⁰ Eisenman (1984: 64–81).

¹¹ Eisenman (2003).

¹² Patin (1993: 92).

¹³ Bergren (1992: 16–17).

¹⁴ Eisenman (1987: 181).

cepts (such as difference, quarry, palimpsest, absence, trace, misreading), reworked and sometimes changed profoundly. In a lengthy essay, "Misreading", he pointed out that the decisive objectives of architecture (such as housing, sheltering or dwelling) always were accompanied by, harder to notice, exploring new possibilities of implementing the principle. Both efforts – the simple implementation of an objective and the search for new forms – are antinomian, and in the history of architecture it often take place suppressing the critical attitude and bringing it rather to improve existing solutions than to reflect on any changes on the level of the very principles. Eisenman undermined the opinion about architectural modernism as a set of changes in architecture, and pointed to its conservatism in addressing the core objectives. He opposed the understanding of architecture as a building (defined as presence) against architecture understood as a displacing and dislocating reflection (defined as absence). Describing his current activity he expressed the conviction that it is just an attempt to dislocate metaphysical purposes of architecture.¹⁵ He has criticized his previous searching for essentialization and autonomy of architecture, but already in *House III* he saw the strategies that went beyond the paradigm of modernism: "Though specific formal styles come and go, architectural aesthetics have nevertheless always been governed by perceptions of hierarchy, that is, by the identifying and ranking of primary, secondary, and tertiary conditions within the object, on the basis arbitrary but established rules. (...) In order to dislocate such convention of Reading, an effort was made In *House III* to give all configurational elements – that is, solids, voids, columns, walls, etc. – equal value. His strategy was carried out in both plan and elevation as the conventional hierarchical system pervades both of these aspects."¹⁶ As deciding for abandoning the illusions of autonomy and also the first of entering the path of deconstruction, Eisenman regarded *House VI*.¹⁷ The idea, which was to replace the autonomy, became "absence" – now understood as the absence of sources (initial conditions) for the metaphysics of architecture. „That there is no origin, no » architecture itself «, that there is no autonomous, fully defined architecture. Suggest the

possibility of architecture's open-ended capacity for displacement, for new possibilities of meaning".¹⁸ Any previous justifications of architecture were considered as fictions (novelizations) originating outside of architecture. In his essay "The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End" he pointed to three major fictions regarded as the arché of architecture: the first was the recognition that architecture reflects undeniable patterns or cultural ideals, and the second was the conviction of rationality of architecture, the third seeking justifications in studies of the past whose results turned out to be arbitrary (though, in their times, they presented itself as objective).¹⁹ In turn, in his essay "Moving Arrows, Eros and Other Errors: an Architecture of Absence", Eisenman has described the use of the human dimension for formulation of proportions in architecture.²⁰ All these observations relating to the deepest principles of architecture were confronted with the strategies likely to resist the power of classical rules. If we would skip all the specific vocabulary which characterized postulated modes of conduct, it might be said that Eisenman suggested creating an architecture as a novel, starting from any chosen thread and develop it further by an internal novelistic logic.

Since the previous justifications were also fictionalizations, it is possible to take, as a starting point of an architectural design, analysis of the main themes of the old stage drama; in another case a story about the past of a given site; and in yet another to transform a project of a single object into a plan for the whole district. In each of these particular cases it was possible to reach a state that met the conditions of a typical architectural project and a potential object could be realized. A set of suggested practices was defined as "scaling", because its essence was the free use of dimensions, while ignoring the basis of the human dimensions, the globe or proportions derived from the space research. New practices refer also to such treatment of a site, which regarded as a starting point not only its current state, but it was an attempt to exploit the memory of it and a record of actions changing it while designing (a record of project work). The architect has also pursued his earlier polemical approach to functionality, and proved that sat-

¹⁵ Eisenman (1987: 169).

¹⁶ Eisenman (1987: 178).

¹⁷ Eisenman (1987: 181).

¹⁸ Eisenman (1987: 182).

¹⁹ Eisenman (1984a: 154–172).

²⁰ Eisenman (1986: 77–83).

isfactory results could be got from a study of interdependencies between components of a project superimposed in layers on each other. In a system similar to a palimpsest a specific dialogue occurs between the components, creating an inner story of an architectural text. In his essay "Architecture and the Problem of the Rhetorical Figure" he developed further the issue of internalization of meanings of the language of architecture.²¹ Detaching signs of architecture from their inner meanings, he reaches hitherto suppressed (absent) possibilities, but also increases the possibility of internal correspondence of signs and writing his own architectural text. The signs become "opaque", do not refer to external values, but present themselves in separation from them while continuously retain the possibility of connecting with other signs in a kind of "rhetorical figures".

We can say that, until the mid-80s, Eisenman had become the author of a number of strategies that seek to challenge the most traditional foundation of architecture, especially functionality and aestheticism. Main observations of that period concerned to demonstrate that these values came from outside the field of architecture and could be freely exchanged for other, even chosen completely arbitrarily. The very strength of internal connections of elements of the "language" of architecture causes that, after detaching them from external meanings, architecture is not subject to destruction, and the described critical processes lead to its reaffirmation and renewal.

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²¹ Eisenman (1987: 17–22).

TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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An artist and a library. Bibliophilia in contemporary Polish art

A major part of a book collection belonging to an outstanding and venerable art historian and critic Professor Mieczysław Porębski has found its place by the newly-established library of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCAK) in Krakow that was opened in spring 2011. The MOCAK received a library of almost four thousand volumes from the scholar's study of his Krakow flat (two smaller book collections exist in his residences in Warsaw and Ustron) as well as several dozen of works of art, most of which had been gifts from his artist friends. "This was my collection. I was not collecting works [of art], just books [...]" explains Mieczysław Porębski. "A coincidence was at the bottom of it, a coincidence hidden in me that I would not like to disclose but keep it secret instead."¹ Walter Benjamin remarked that every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories.² Books saved from dispersion, works of art and furniture were all assembled in a separate, specially designed room arranged to look like the scholar's study.

In the still empty halls of the MOCAK Library the *Bibliophilia* exhibition by Maurycy Gomulicki was opened. Writing about Professor Mieczysław

Porębski's library in his review of the opening of the MOCAK Karol Sienkiewicz noted: "It is a pity that an ambitious project has been ridiculed at the very start by a real oddity, Maurycy Gomulicki's exhibition *Bibliophilia*. This time his concept of the 'culture of delight' has taken the form of a 'spring in the library'. On the photographs some young, beautiful models wearing bikinis and holding books in their hands are posing against the background of bookshelves. They are supposed to embody 'the freshness of the experience of a library'. Repeating after the artist – the important does not have to mean the serious. But does the unserious have to mean the obviously sexist?"³ Sexist (that is a frequent objection to Gomulicki's work) photographs of young women in bikinis against the background of bookshelves next to the entrance to Professor Mieczysław Porębski's Library appear to be somewhat out of place. Could Maurycy Gomulicki and the curator of his exhibition Adam Mazur be considered tricksters? Still, let us note at once that by taking a trickster approach they prevent high values from fossilising. It is the political correctness of the reviewer that disarms the artist's and curator's trickster strategy and the raised objection against sexism that stigmatises the deeply erotic nature of

¹ Porębski (2010).

² Benjamin (2007: 60), Kaszubski (2011: 94).

³ Sienkiewicz (2011).

the trickster, his insatiable sexual desire. It is worth remembering here that in the 1970s when offering a painting to the Main Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow Jerzy Nowosielski chose one of his nudes. Documenting its transfer in the library's *Liber Benefactorum* he originally entered it roguishly as *Striptease*. Eventually, he crossed out the title deciding for a more conventional *Nude* (*Akt*) (the title rooted in the culture, especially in the academic tradition). Another loose association comes to my mind: several years ago Professor Mieczysław Porębski wrote an essay for the catalogue of an exhibition entitled *Classics and Virgins* (*Klasycy i dziewice*) in the National Museum in Wrocław that featured a part of Teresa and Andrzej Starmach's collection.⁴ These works of classic abstract painters were accompanied by immaculate, traditionally posed nudes of Marta Deskur from the *Virgins* (*Dziewice*) series of 2002.

In keeping with the idea of *bright and beautiful* intellectuals love surrounding themselves with beautiful women. Małgorzata Komza remarks that many deliberations about book lovers contain comparisons of their feelings to fascination with women and to losing one's head for them.⁵ She gives an example of a French historian and philologist, a precursor of Romanticism, librarian, bibliographer and a book lover Charles Nodier, who, in his description of the various categories of book lovers "L'Amateur de livres", published in the work *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* by Curmer in Paris in 1841, put bibliophiles, i.e. amateurs of the purest intentions on the first place. Characterising them, Nodier remarked that they loved books like a lover would love the picture of his beloved.⁶ Another French book lover, writer and librarian, Paul Lacroix, who signed his works *Bibliophil Jacob* or *P. L. Jacob, bibliophil* in his text "Les Amateurs de vieux livres" published in two issues in 1840 and 1841 in the *Bulletin du bibliophile* created his own typology of book lovers in which bibliophiles are at the very top. Lacroix also wrote about bibliomaniacs-hoarders who treat books like lovers and for whom a library is a seraglio, with no access allowed even to eunuchs.⁷

"I treat the library," confessed Maurycy Gomulicki, "as a resource and a backdrop for letting my imagination roam; a place of manifold initiations. The smell of dust and the daydreaming about girls coexist perfectly in my consciousness. To this day, whenever I see pornographic photographs with books in the background, I find myself trying to make out the titles along the shelves instead of concentrating on the ecstatically writhing bodies. Books are not only the knowledge contained therein – for me, they are primarily a source of pleasure."⁸ Gomulicki's artistic actions conform to the criteria of pleasure and delight. When photographing young attractive women in bikinis against the background of bookshelves, the artist was playing a refreshing game with an undertone of sexual desire in places that usually have nothing in common with eroticism. However, despite using the strategy of erotic arousal (a trickster's *alter ego* is a phallus), he admits that when he sees a naked woman against the background of books on a pornographic image, a reader in him wins and he begins to decipher the titles of the books from their spines.

Maurycy Gomulicki's *Bibliophilia* project (described as "a spring in the library" during its realisation) was dedicated to the memory of his grandfather Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki (1909–2006), a historian of Polish literature, an editor and essayist whose vast library of "a humanist and an unruly spirit, a lover of curiosities and 'beautiful ladies'" constituted the "real background" of the artist's childhood and youth.⁹ Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki was in turn the son of Wiktor Gomulicki (1848–1919), a poet, novelist, literary critic, bibliophile and collector. After his grandfather's death Maurycy Gomulicki had to confront the bibliophile legacy. "Over the last few years, I have had the opportunity," recalled Maurycy Gomulicki, "to adopt the massive body of his [Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki's] library; taking leave of it has been a process as laborious as it has been emotionally difficult – I have had to deconstruct something that has been one of the few stable points in my life."¹⁰ The mourning of a close relative was accompanied by a dispersal of his valuable library where the artist had been growing up. Maurycy Gomulicki with female friends catalogued the book collection of his grandfather. He donated

⁴ Klasycy (2007).

⁵ Komza (2009: 378).

⁶ Komza (2009: 374).

⁷ Komza (2009: 379).

⁸ Gomulicki (2011).

⁹ Gomulicki (2011).

¹⁰ Gomulicki (2011).

most of the books (about seven thousand copies) to public libraries and kept about 2500 books for himself, those, as he wrote, that he “found interesting both for their meaningful titles and their particularly appealing, ‘modern’ graphic design.”¹¹ The photos for the *Bibliophilia* project presenting young women (the artist’s friends or models) in bikinis against the background of bookshelves full of books were taken in the library of Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki, the artist’s library, in the Logos second-hand bookshop in Warsaw, Mauricio Lopez’s Mexican second-hand bookshop and in the library of the late Mexican intellectualist Jaime García Terrés (ills. 1–3). Gomulicki’s *Bibliophilia* exhibition in MOCAK presented a selection of fourteen of those photographs. Knowing the circumstances of their creation, it turns out that the “spring in the library” has a strong undercurrent of autumn.

Another example of bibliophilia in art is the Old Librarian, the character of Grzegorz Sztwiertnia’s *The Pleasure of the Text*, asexual at first glance but, as it turns out, endowed with a great sexual appetite (ills. 4–5). Sztwiertnia’s video was created at the turn of April and May 2007 for the May shown in the One Book Gallery in the Main Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow¹². The sleepy and somnambulistic action of this oneiric work is set in the early Modernist interiors of the reading room of the Main Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, previously the library of the Museum of Technology and Industry (established in 1868, it ceased to exist more than half a century ago). The incorporeal and fleeting video image itself already contains something hypnotic, similar to a dream. In Sztwiertnia’s work, irresistibly bringing to mind *The Dead Class* (*Umarła klasa*) by Tadeusz Kantor, the Old Librarian, “a crazed sleepwalker embodied by the Great Sir Andrzej,”¹³ in striped pyjamas and slippers, sleepwalks in the empty library at night evoking melancholy sadness. In the empty space of the library he experiences the pleasure of the text that the library becomes. Grzegorz Sztwiertnia is known for his medical obsessions played on the art field. In one of his texts we read: “‘collection’ or ‘set’ are signs of ailment which leads to the disappearance of the ‘nobler emotions’, the opposite



Ill. 1. Maurycy Gomulicki, *Sheily* (22) Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Olimpia Press, Paris 1959; Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki’s library, Warsaw 2007



Ill. 2. Maurycy Gomulicki, *Patrycja* (15), artist’s library, Warsaw, 2008



Ill. 3. Maurycy Gomulicki, *Sofia* (22), *Instinct: Selected Readings*, edited by Robert C. Birney and Richard C. Teevan, D. Van Nostrand Company INC, 1961; Jaime García Terrés’s library, México City, 2009

¹¹ Gomulicki (2011).

¹² Antos (2010: 151–167).

¹³ Sztwiertnia (2007).



Ill. 4. Grzegorz Sztwiertnia, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 2007



Ill. 5. Grzegorz Sztwiertnia, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 2007

of common sense.”¹⁴ To describe the atmosphere of this video further, the artist’s comment about a different project of his can be quoted: “There is a disease in the air.” Let’s diagnose it then. In *The Pleasure of the Text* this disease is bibliophilia. As far as trickster strategies and medical obsessions are concerned, let us note that one of Sztwiertnia’s ancestors is Stańczyk, a Renaissance court jester who walked with a bandaged jaw simulating a toothache and collected medical advice from people. The cunning Sztwiertnia very often uses confabulation and simulation in his art.

The night-time tête-à-tête of the Old Librarian in the Library with its book collection (the Old Librarian is brushing against the catalogue cabinet, caresses catalogue cards, magazines and books, library furniture) is a source of pleasure for him. We are dealing here with a lonely pleasure of a librar-

ian collector, fetishist and frotteur, relishing “his” library at night. Sleepwalking is widely known to represent the creative process. Over one hundred years ago a thesis was formed about the symbolic character of dream visions and about the similarity between the dream creativity and artistic creativity, at the same time pointing out their dependence on the subconsciousness.¹⁵ In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Grzegorz Sztwiertnia’s creation of the romantic and somewhat mysterious and unearthly atmosphere with the “sleepwalking” Old Librarian in the library serves the suggestive-hypnotic-lulling function. The artificial somnambular sleep used therapeutically was a way of penetrating the human psyche. While dreaming, sleepwalkers were directly relating their dreams. For Grzegorz Sztwiertnia, an artist of “afflictions of the spirit”, sleepwalking is one of the ailments in which the spirit is expressed through the body.

The image in *The Pleasure of the Text* is accompanied by fragments of *The Pleasure of the Text* by Roland Barthes that had been chosen by the artist and are awkwardly and without understanding read out by Great Sir Andrzej. Simultaneously, the English translation of the read-out fragments appears on the screen. This is, as Ewa Małgorzata Tatar noted, “the (dis)pleasure of the text,”¹⁶ the inability to find oneself in a language. Izabela Kopania claims: “Both the title and the main plot of Sztwiertnia’s work refer to a book by Roland Barthes that contains a comparison of the text to the body, a key to the film. In Sztwiertnia’s film, the text is replaced by a place. An old man dressed in striped pyjamas wanders around the library. He solemnly touches books and furniture, enters into direct relationships with the space. The touch is a very intimate touch, simply erotic. As if the library were an inseparable part of a wandering sleepwalker, a body complimentary to his. By building an intriguing relation between the place/body and the perception of the place, the artist transfers it onto an emotional plane. [...] Sold to the library, he lives in self-created world, which devoid of a place describing it would become a space of emotional homelessness.”¹⁷ On the other hand, Małgorzata Butterwick states: “Grzegorz Sztwiertnia’s video – in the artist’s typical climate of simulated psychosis disconnected from the reality

¹⁵ Podraza-Kwiatkowska (1985: 161).

¹⁶ Tatar (2008: 12–13).

¹⁷ Kopania (2007: 23–24).

¹⁴ Sztwiertnia (2002: 93).

– refers to our enslavement by the language. [...] Along with the title *The Pleasure of the Text* the image shows the oneiric-onanistic character of relations with the language as a tool of cognition [...]. We do not feel suffering in this work, but a witty intellectual joke, even some consolation that disturbing the normative balance may enrich some areas of our lives even though it may distract us from others.”¹⁸

As we know from the artist's commentary *On "The Pleasure of the Text" – a Word from the Author* (*O „Przyjemności tekstu” – parę słów autora*), he distinctly remembers Susan Sontag's words on the need for eroticism in the contact with art. Roland Barthes published *The Pleasure of the Text* in 1973 (its Polish translation appeared in 1997).¹⁹ In this small book Barthes spoke about the pleasure (a description of experiencing erotic delight) that the reader experiences while reading a book, which the traditional theoretical perspectives would usually omit. The French poststructuralist critic and historian of literature resigned from such traditional categories of theory of literature as “work”, “interpretation”, “author”, “truth”, replacing them with such categories as “text”, “reading”, “reader”, “pleasure”, thus increasing the creative activity of the reader. Leaving the science of literature for literature itself Barthes left truth for pleasure. Reading of a literary text is above all supposed to give sensual (even erotic) pleasure.²⁰

The show in the Main Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow featured a support artist invited by Grzegorz Sztwiertnia – Hubert Czerepok, an artist who is the author of several videos on the subject of a library. Using trickster strategies, he critically analysed the institution of a library, radically twisting its main functions. In his 2001 video *Protection* books, like dumbbells in a gym, served the purpose of keeping fit, not improving mental prowess. In his *Library* made in 2003 Czerepok showed a reader who fell asleep having lost interest in the book he had been reading. Instead of being a place of studying or reading, the library became a place of rest. Still, let us remember that bibliotherapy (including the reader's sleep in the library) is one of library's main functions. The sleepwalking dream of the Old Librarian from Sztwiertnia's

video is nothing else but a form of bibliotherapy. Czerepok's critical analyses were followed by the ultimate anarchistic solution, a recording of an explosion with the help of pop cultural “pirate metaphysics” as per *found footage* strategy. In the One Book Gallery during the demonstration of *The Pleasure of the Text* by Grzegorz Sztwiertnia a video screen saver was designed on a library computer by Hubert Czerepok – *Library Save Saver*, 1970–2002, an apocalyptic image, a recording of an explosion with burning books flying up in the air. “The whole thing created,” wrote Ewa Łączyńska, “an impression of a huge orgy of freeing the book, the text, the word.”²¹ Especially in the context of Czerepok's apocalyptic work Sztwiertnia's *The Pleasure of the Text* must be read as a kind of ironic *hommage* for the Old Librarian sleepwalking in the library, an elegy for Gutenberg's civilisation bidding us farewell. In the somnambulist behaviour of the Old Librarian (the analogue of creativity) some melancholic features can be observed. The artist, referring to the motif of the library, creates a melancholic but at the same time infused with subtle irony image of changes happening in the modern culture as well as a portrait of the Old Librarian as a representative of the whole formation that had been connected with the old library, its atmosphere and the culture of the book that are departing before our eyes. This is the end of a microcosm that has survived in some places. A French anthropologist Marc Augé, in accordance with the title of his book,²² sees the outbreak of “the war of dreams” in the progressing fictionalisation of the world. “Dreams and myths are threatened,” as Hans Belting writes in a review of Marc Augé's arguments, “by ‘total fiction’ that usurps private images unto itself and breaks down collective myths.”²³

Kamil Kuskowski's works are perceived as post-conceptual reflections on art. The exhibition entitled *The Feast of Painting* (*Uczta Malarstwa*, *ill. 6*) and showed in Łódź's Atlas Sztuki gallery at the turn of 2007 and 2008 consisted of two parts placed in separate rooms. In the first part Kuskowski arranged still lifes consisting of objects and victuals on the tables. “In the word ‘*uczta*’ [Polish: feast],” as the artist referred to his exhibition, “we hear ‘*uczta malarstwa*’ [Polish: teach painting]. That leads

¹⁸ Butterwick (2008).

¹⁹ Barthes (1997).

²⁰ Burzyńska, Markowski (2006: 305–357).

²¹ Łączyńska (2007).

²² Augé (1997).

²³ Belting (2007: 102).



Ill. 6.

Kamil Kuskowski, *Feast of Painting*, 2007; the exhibition *P for Painting* in the Gallery of Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, 2010, photo: Grzegorz Sztwiertnia

towards the room with albums that teach painting to many.”²⁴ *The Feast of Painting* by Kuskowski is a reflection on painting; perhaps, above all, a reflection on a painting reproduced in a book. It is also another example of bibliophilia. In fact, this installation is a small library of exclusive catalogues and books on painting published by famous museums and galleries and renowned publishing houses. Kuskowski used a certain trick here. Each richly-illustrated catalogue of great masters, each book with reproductions of works by famous painters was framed (yet, they can be taken out of their frames and browsed through, just like a book in a library or a bookshop). In their decorative, silver or gold plated frames the book spines with the names of painters and authors look like paintings in an art gallery. In his project Kuskowski continues and develops the issue of pararegon (framing) that is important to him and that had been earlier taken up in art i.a. by John Baldessari.²⁵ Kuskowski created paintings from real objects. As the artist describes it: “A book on paintings that becomes a painting itself is, in my opinion, a very contradictory situation.”²⁶ That is a confession of a pure trickster.

Kamil Kuskowski’s unusually “aesthetic” *Feast of Painting* with its decoratively framed books and catalogues with reproductions of paintings was created seventy years after the influential text of Walter Benjamin *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechan-*

cal Reproduction that dates back to the 1930s. The changes in the techniques of reproduction and its availability are changing not only the reception but the character of a work of art itself. By year of birth, Kuskowski belongs to one of the last age groups that learned about the masterpieces of European art only with the help of reproductions in books, especially albums. Younger generations first see them via the Internet. A book in its traditional sense is doing well all the time and will surely survive the cyberspace and the process of digitalisation of modern societies. It will become something exclusive. Recurring fears that new forms of books will eliminate its traditional form are nothing new. Kuskowski’s library with its expensive books framed in decorative gold or silver plated frames appears to be just something exclusive. The artist believes that “a book and art have a lot in common.”²⁷ He performs a significant inversion by creating a painting out of a book of the age of mechanical reproduction. “In this exhibition I say that I am making this album into a work of art,” he claims.²⁸ “The frame here,” Jarosław Lubiak notes, “is an attempt at harnessing the excess.”²⁹ It is worth mentioning that Kuskowski in his unusually “aesthetic” gallery of paintings consisting of albums with reproductions of great masters treated as works of art equalised them all only at this purely aesthetic level. Kuskowski is also the author of a series of paintings entitled *The Paintings*

²⁴ Kuskowski (2007: 8).

²⁵ Lubiak (2007: 3–7).

²⁶ Kuskowski (2007: 9).

²⁷ Kuskowski (2007: 10).

²⁸ Kuskowski (2007: 10).

²⁹ Lubiak (2007: 5).

of Art (*Obrazy sztuki*) presenting magnified spines of books about art, e.g. *Le Surnaturel* by Malraux. Between *The Feast of Painting* and *The Paintings of Art* the relation of inversion takes place. These works were co-exhibited on Kuskowski's exhibition *P for Painting (M jak malarstwo)* in the Painting Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow in 2010. If Malraux used mass technical reproduction in order to create a "museum without walls", then Kuskowski paradoxically placed his *Feast of Painting* works on an "aesthetically" painted wall, where inscribed names of artists visible on the spines of decoratively framed books can be treated as a kind of epitaphs.

In turn, the author of a photographic installation called *The Library* is Nicolas Groszpiere, a cool and analytic photographer of architecture, an enthusiast of the aesthetics of the late Modernism and Brutalism, one of so-called new documentary photo-makers, a creator of conceptual projects in which he uses photography in order to present an idea. His *Library* (ill. 7) is a metaphor of the world as library or book, inspired by Jorge Luis Borges's short story *The Library of Babel*. In the prose of the Argentinean writer obsessively recurring images (labyrinth, library, mirror) show the relativity of all truths and philosophical systems. Born and living in a library storage area the narrator of *The Library of Babel* is tragically sure that every possible book already exists and investigates what exactly the infinite Library is. Groszpiere's *Library* project, showed in the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in 2006 and in the Library of the University of Warsaw in 2007, "is not the representation of a specific library, but rather an attempt at representing the very essence of the idea of a library."³⁰ This work is a representation of a library as infinite collecting of books.

On the 11th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice in 2008 called *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building* an exhibition *Hotel Polonia. The Afterlife of Buildings* was presented in the Polish Pavilion. Scripted and curated by Grzegorz Piątek and Jarosław Trybuś, it was awarded a Golden Lion for the best National Participation. It featured six photographic triptychs consisting of lightboxes showing prestigious modern buildings of Warsaw (with the exception of the Licheń basilica), photographed by Groszpiere and their critical visional

trickster transformations showing life after life by Kobas Laksa who deals with photo manipulation and photomontage. In the times of "liquid modernity" the Vitruvian rule of *firmitas* (solidity) has been called into question not only in regard to buildings. One of the buildings photographed by Groszpiere for the *Hotel Polonia. The Afterlife of Building* exhibition is the Library of the University of Warsaw tricksterly transformed by Kobas Laksa into a shopping centre. These works were created during an economic crisis, but, as can be seen, this crisis had and still has a character much wider than just economic.

The above presentation of the various examples of bibliophilia in the contemporary Polish art is far from being complete. One of the newest examples is Agnieszka Kurant's installation *The Phantom Library (Widmowa biblioteka)*, a collection of "produced" fictitious books, that only exist on the pages of other books and are known only from the texts of other authors. In her project Kurant used the research and work of several people cataloguing such fictitious books. Its title comes from Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz's book *The Phantom Library. A Lexicon of Imaginary Books (Widmowa biblioteka. Leksykon książek urojonych)*.³¹ Kurant's installation consists of 400 such unwritten books that were given book covers designed by Kasia Korczak, all printed and complete with names of fictitious authors, titles, ISBN numbers and bar codes, expressing virtual capital and non-material work. For many years the artist has been interested in the way how fictions and invisible elements of reality gain real symbolic, political and economic value.

Generally speaking, a bibliophile is an avid collector. "It is difficult to define bibliophilia – it will be the issue of the degree of interest rather than its essence."³² Interest and passion are more important here. Defining bibliophilia in art is as difficult as defining bibliophilia itself. Oftentimes artists define their works in this way and the works created by them present the passion or the criticism of the love of books. The above-mentioned examples of bibliophilia sometimes appear as craziness, a disease even. It seems we should not try to narrow down the definition of bibliophilia in art. As Bogusław Bachorczyk recalled his childhood: "I remember the smell of library and books. It was a world

³⁰ Groszpiere (n.d.).

³¹ Dunin-Wąsowicz (1997).

³² Duninowicz (1983: 5).



Ill. 7. Nicolas Groszpiere, *The Library*, 2006



Ill. 8. Bogusław Bachorczyk, *Exhibition in a country library 1976-1979*, 2012, photo: Tomasz Baran

unavailable to me that I was slowly discovering”³³ (ill. 8). This world, mysterious for many artists, is explored by them and shown from sides that are inaccessible to us.

Translated by Helena Belava

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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The figure of trickster in crime novels by Henning Mankell, Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbø

Trickster is a mythological figure which seems to be remarkably tempting for those who create popular culture. The trickster's complexity, multidimensionality, the splitting between different worlds, and his transgressed nature make this figure an attractive model to construct many literary characters. There are plenty of them in pop culture: Joker from *Batman*, eerie Clown from *It!* by Stephen King, Stanley Ipkiss the main character of *The Mask*, Jareth the Goblin King from Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*, and even House M.D., or even Bugs Bunny – these are only a few examples taken from the crowded universe of pop cultural tricksters.

Carl Gustav Jung, while writing about archetypes, singled out the trickster figure, as one which is mutual for many remote cultures, which seem to have nothing in common at the first glance. The archetype of trickster belongs to the collective unconscious, which is transmitted epoch by epoch, from one continent to the other, over the borders and cultures. As Paul Radin remarked that there are very few myths with such a wide scope.¹

Andrew Samuels, Bani Shorter, Fred Plaut claim that Jung found a similarity between Trickster and the alchemic image of Mercury, whose avocation for tricks and jokes was very widely known. Trickster

had also an ability to change the form of himself and had a dual nature – half human half animalistic. His foolishness was not a completely negative feature, thanks to it he can reach more than the others with their wisdom.²

Monika Sznajderman in her work on the jesters, finds the affinity to jesters. She claims that one can describe an enigmatic figure of trickster as a clown like character, with the mercuric changeability and unpredictability, half human half animal, who is the embodiment of all contradictions; he is a creator and destroyer, he cheats and is cheated as well as he is responsible both for good and evil although he does not use a regular ethics as due to his archaic roots he is a being whose existence is ahead of all ethics. He can be a demon but also a saint.³

The figure of trickster is often understood as the manifestation of the rebellion, defiance and chaos. He becomes the foremost nonconformist in his own world, as the one who revolts against the social rules as well as against the God laws. Sometimes regarded as a good-for-nothing, a moron, a clown, yet he is extremely crafty, astute and cunning. As Sznajderman notices there is a certain connection between the pleasure he finds in playing spiteful prac-

¹ Sznajderman (2000: 27).

² Samuels, Shorter, Plaut (1993: 73).

³ Sznajderman (2000: 26).

tical jokes on somebody and his ability to undergo the metamorphosis into different forms, thanks to his dual nature.⁴ In numerous folk and fairy tales he occurs to be much more intelligent and smarter than the others. Such characters are Tom Thumb, Askelladen or Jack the Fool are remains of the folk images of the archetype.

This duality of his existence – both divine and human (or animalistic) enables him to keep changing his forms, to undergo transformations easily. It is sometimes difficult to judge his moral and ethical aspects of this archetype's different embodiments since he creates the rules on his own, which he follows although he might be inconsistent even with his own laws.

Trickster, as an element of chaos, provokes to arguments and squabbles, even if he does not take part in them. However the havoc, wreaked by him, can be extremely destructive. The other side of this archetype is more altruistic – an excellent example can be Prometheus – redeemer sacrificing himself for the others, combining the idea of social order and its disruption.⁵

Since the duality and split personality are the characteristic features of him, one has to find it natural that this character joins together both positive as well as negative aspects, using both the power of darkness and the light. In many tales the trickster may appear to be an idiot or a fool but it is only a camouflage since he is more intelligent and crafty than the other individuals in the fairy-tale world. Jack the Fool, Tom Thumb, or Askelladen are only a few examples of tricksters taken from the folk stories, which simply are the remnants of the archetype in the folk culture.

In Norse mythology is the figure of trickster exceptionally distinctive. It is Loki – an ambiguous creature, who is both a god (he belongs to Æsir gods who live in Asgard) as well as he is a *Jotunn* – a giant endowed with super power. He is akin to Odin and Thor, and this fact gave him a divine provenance, however his father is Fárbaumi – the giant. In *Poetic Edda* it was not clearly stated which side he sympathized with – humans, gods or giants. He is referred as a father of three largest monsters in the Norse Mythology – Midgardsorm – a huge snake surrounding the Earth, Fenrir – a monstrous

wolf, and Hel – the goddess who presides over the realm of death.

The gods have to endure his impudence, as he often is able to come to their assistance. However, when Iðunn, the goddess of youth, disappears due to his tricks, and Loki caused the death of Baldr – the most beautiful and most beloved god of all, the gods realize that he overstepped the line. Loki has been captured and locked in the cave, where he is bound to the rock and the snake placed over him drips his venom over Loki's body. The Norse trickster will remain prisoned until Ragnarok day, when he is going to lead the giants in the last battle against the gods, and cause their extermination.⁶

Loki is extremely mischievous and intelligent, he knows what to do to get out of the greatest trouble. He is also a shape changer – he can change himself into a fly, bee, horse, seal and salmon. Not only can he transform himself into an animal, but also he can alter his sex, for example as a mare he seduced Svadilfari and became a mother of Sleipnir – an eight-legged horse.

His most famous appearance in *Poetic Edda* is in the poem Loki's Mocking: Loki comes as an uninvited guest at the feast for gods, where he insulted lots of them criticizing their flaws such as meanness, cowardice, promiscuity and unfaithfulness. Himself, he may be cruel, deceitful, envious and vindictive. Loki is usually a harbinger of troubles when he appears in the action of the Eddaic poems. It can be stated that he combines both comic and demonic features which is very characteristic of trickster characters.⁷

Loki is an inherent part of the mythical trickster archetype, and reminds other related characters from Greek mythology (such as Prometheus – the one who gave fire to the humans), Indian (Coyote – a mythological figure common for beliefs of Navaho and Winnebago, Jaguar – the thief of fire in South American mythologies), Maori mythology (Māui – the one who discovers the secret of fire) or Slavic Mythology (Wesles – the god of the spirit world).

The archetype image of a trickster seems to match to the world of crime fiction and its characters. Thanks to the ambiguity of this figure, its split personality, the elements showing the moral dilemma can be introduced in the plot. In the Scan-

⁴ Sznajderman (2000: 280).

⁵ Sznajderman (2000: 32).

⁶ Daly (2004: 54–57).

⁷ Sznajderman (2000: 32).

dinavian crime fiction some literary tricksters can be modelled after mythical Loki. My aim is to take a closer look at some Scandinavian crime fiction works which reinterpret this archetypal model in their plots.

One of such trickster-alike figures is Åke Larstam – a perverse murderer from the novel by Henning Mankell *One step behind*.

It is very difficult to snare him due to the fact that all the traces left by him are so confusing. One of his abilities is aptitude of blending in with the background and surroundings so that He could remain long invisible for his hunters. Besides, his motives are unclear and not entirely logical for other people, what makes him even more difficult to trace. Larstam used to be an engineer but he was dismissed as he was unable to cooperate with his colleagues. After having moved out from the hometown he found the job at the post office. As a rural postman He gains access to All the intimate secrets described in the letters, which He opens and reads. What is the thorn in his side is the happiness and joy of the others. He finds out about their plans and ambitions while reading postcards or opening the envelopes over the steam. He kills those who seem to be the luckiest ones, and at the moment when his victims are at sheer bliss; for instance the newlyweds are killed during the photo session on the beach, a group of friends, who enjoy historical reconstructions, are murdered at the Midsummer picnic. Larstam derives sadistic perverse pleasure from making the fanciful compositions of dead bodies and taking pictures of them to immortalize the moments.

“At midnight he had still not made up his mind. He knew he had plenty of time. They would be staying until dawn. Perhaps they would even stay and sleep all morning. He knew their plans down to the last detail. It gave him a feeling of unlimited power. Only he who had the upper hand would escape.”⁸

Though he cannot, as other mythological tricksters take animalistic forms he has an ability to undergo transformations. He works as a postman, and this job allows him to become almost invisible for the people around him. After all, nobody pays attention to the army of cleaners, conductors, gardeners, milkmen or postmen while they are working, they all belong to the indiscernible part of the

society due to the fact that for common citizens the results of their work are so obvious that a passer-by will not preoccupy his thoughts with them. One glides over their faces which remain almost transparent and cannot be extracted from the memories.

Thanks to his job Åke Larstam is able to blend into the background almost like a chameleon. That is the reason why he is able to choose his victims so precisely and it gives him an opportunity to observe them so closely and quietly. Without arousing any suspicions, he may sneak so closely to assault his victims in the moment of their greatest joy. His jealousy is devilish and the pleasure he derives from his wickedness is perverse. His attitude reminds of the character of Joker – Batman’s enemy, in the film by Tim Burton.

His private rebellion is not against the social rules, rather a disagreement on someone else’s luck and happiness, when he himself is so miserable.

“The bride-to-be let him in. He could no longer remember her name, but he remembered her joy, and it enraged him. He took her letters and posted them, (...). All six envelopes in front of him were wedding invitations. He had read their letters, got to know each couple. He knew where they lived, what they looked like, and where they were to be married.

The invitations in front of him were merely printed cards, there to remind him of the different couples. Now he faced his most important task, deciding which of the couples was the happiest. (...) He savoured the moment, suffused with contentment. He was in charge. In this soundproofed room he could not be touched by the things that had made him suffer in his earlier life – the feeling of being an outsider and being misunderstood. In here he could bear to think about the great catastrophe, when he was shut out and declared superfluous. (...) People were laid off. (...) More and more of them ended up on the outside and had not yet learned how to break free.”⁹

The characteristic feature of many mythological tricksters is the duality of their nature. Scandinavian Loki is a shape changer, being able to transform into an animal. He is both – a god and a *jotunn* (a giant, who is the god’s enemy). His sexuality is also ambiguous; sometimes to deceive his opponents he takes a form of a woman and even a mare.

⁸ Mankell (2004: 14).

⁹ Mankell (2004: 308–309).

Larstam seems to have a similar secret – he is a homosexual deriving pleasure from dressing as a woman. His long-time partner is a policeman, one of Kurt Wallander's colleagues. None of policemen working in Ystad guesses that Svedberg leads a double life. Only when Svedberg is killed by his lover do deeply hidden details of his sexual identity come to light.

Wallander while investigating has some suspicions that an attractive woman called Louise might be involved in the case. During the coincidental meeting in the Copenhagen bar he tries to interrogate her but she disappears without a trace while leaving under the pretext of going to the toilet. No sooner does the policeman realize who exactly he has been talking to:

"In a way, Louise is still in the bar," he answered, "because Louise is just an act, put on by someone else. A man. That wrestler who was guarding the door said three men left the bar during the last ten minutes. One of them was Louise, with her wig in her pocket and all her make-up wiped off." (...) "When she went into the lavatory, she took off her makeup and the wig, and then she walked out again," Wallander said. "She probably altered something about the way her clothing looked as well. Neither of us noticed anything, because we were waiting for a woman to come out. Who would have noticed a man?"¹⁰

In fact Louise is a dressed-up Larstam. The murderer demonstrates also an obsession for the victims in disguise – the teenagers in the eighteenth-century costumes, the bride and groom in their wedding outfits. He plans to kill Wallander and after his death he wants to dress him in a police uniform and a blonde wig, which he uses as Louise and then perpetuate his work of destruction in the photography.

Out of his love of disguises he creates a certain level of the carnivalization of the world. – the world which is turned upside down in the clownish manner. The world where real happiness and joy seem to be an offence and the ominous trickster's laughter is heart at the time of death. Not creating but destroying and introducing chaos are the Larstam's domain. He is the demiurge whose creation has gone awry and who has his roots in the medieval carnivals, when the fools could rule the city for a few hours. The same carnival of death,

though in much larger format, takes place in *Batman* when Joker begins his reign.¹¹ The similar carnival of death takes place in Sidney in the third novel discussed in this text, namely in not yet available in English *The Bat* (*Flaggermusmannen*) written by a Norwegian writer Jo Nesbø. Sidney in the novel, will resemble in its topography as taken from a nightmare both comic Gotham as well as the medieval cities, intoxicated by the last hours of the carnival before the divine order is to be restored.

Mythological Trickster when human is usually a male. The same happens in literature and popular culture – the trickster incarnations are mainly men, although there are some exceptions.

Such an unusual character is Lisbeth Salander – the heroine of the *Millennium trilogy* written by Stieg Larsson. She is one of the most extraordinary and most popular literary characters in recent years. The girl full of contradiction, whose life is a sheer chaos, wants to be left alone and live her life according to her wishes. However she constantly gets in serious trouble.

Being a small and inconspicuous-looking girl she does not look menacingly but she has, thanks to the kickboxing training, great strength and nimbleness. Due to those skills she is able to cope with much stronger opponents. As she has no education she might even be regarded as developmentally delayed by some people in her surroundings. Hardly anyone knows that Salander has above-average IT skills. She is an excellent researcher and is able to find out almost everything about everybody. Owing to her hacker abilities and photographic memory she is able to solve many puzzles and in Milton Security, the firm where she works, she is regarded as one of the best employees.

Neither is Lisbeth friendly nor she has a sense of humour. She keeps colleagues at distance and is oversensitive about herself. She responds with aggression when someone does not respect her.

One can describe her as tricky – thanks to her cunning ruse Wenneström, the millionaire who cheated on Michael Blomkvist, is punished. Financier contributed to the unjust accusation of Blomkvist and to sentencing him for imprisonment. Salander using her trickster ploys ruins Wenneström and leads to his death spreading news about the dark sides of his business. She also steals money

¹⁰ Mankell (2004: 383).

¹¹ Sznajderman (2000: 138).

from his account. Justice is understood by her only in a sheer utilitarian way.

Lack of respect for social norms and customs is manifested by Lisbeth by being unpunctual, having a nonchalant attitude towards the dress code as well as being able to speak directly what she thinks. These features bring her close to the figures of mythological tricksters, mainly to Loki. Just as Loki she is split between the hatred towards those who hurt her and who hate women and on the other hand the willingness to help those in need, as for example Prometheus did.

What she really wants is to know the truth about herself. She might be honest (even to the extremes as she suffers from Asperger's syndrome¹²) as well as deceitful and devious.

Her sexual life is also affected by duality- she is bisexual. Her steady lesbian partner is a dancer Miriam Wu, but it is not an obstacle for her to begin a love affair with Michael Blomkvist – the journalist, with whom she cooperates while solving a crime puzzle. To her surprise she falls in love with him, and when he breaks her heart she heals it in the arms of a much younger boy while staying at Grenada.

Her inconspicuous is the reason why some people perceive her as absolutely harmless. Her boss, even though aware as he is, of her exceptional talents, states by watching her physiognomy and style:

“He thought for the thousandth time that nobody seemed more out of place in a prestigious security firm than she did”.¹³

The description of the girl as seen through her employer's eyes was :

“(...) anorexic young woman who had hair as short as a fuse, and a pierced nose and eyebrows. She had a wasp tattoo about an inch long on her neck, a tattooed loop around the biceps of her left arm and another around her left ankle. On those occasions when she had been wearing a tank top, Armandsky also saw that she had a dragon tattoo on her left shoulder blade. She was a natural redhead, but she dyed her hair raven black. She looked as

though she had just emerged from a week-long orgy with a gang of hard rockers.”¹⁴

Her petite figure makes that it is difficult to estimate her age correctly so she is sometimes thought to be fourteen instead of the twenty four. Appearances can yet be deceptive – it is Ronald Niedermann, Lisbeth's older half-brother, a monstrous giant from the former GDR, who becomes convinced about that. During the final duel he tries to kill her but his efforts come to nothing. Theoretically, he should be able to kill her with one blow of his fist. Meanwhile, the final of this scene is as follows:

“He met Salander's expressionless eyes and was amazed. She had defeated him. She's supernatural. Instinctively he tried to pull one foot from the floor. She's a monster. He could lift his foot only a few millimetres before his boot hit the heads of the nails. They had been driven into his feet at different angles, and to free himself he would have to rip his feet to shreds. Even with his almost superhuman strength he was unable to pull himself loose.”¹⁵

She has already managed to surprise him and their father – shot by them and buried in the ground she escaped from the grave to take revenge on her persecutors. She is indestructible, almost immortal.

She can also, almost like a chameleon, change her appearance: from a pierced rebel into an attractive blonde with big breasts. While taking a false identity she ménages to steal money from Wenström's bank accounts in Switzerland.

Her strongest metamorphosis takes place in the third volume of the Millennium trilogy – *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*, she is wrongly accused and must stand trial. The purpose of her dressing up is not only to shock the judges but also to make her testimony more credible. This scene also proves that how misleading can be judging people by their appearance. The girl enters the courtroom wearing a leather miniskirt, combat boots and with strong gothic makeup on her face.

“She looked a bit vulgar, to put it mildly. It was almost a Goth look. She reminded him of a vampire in some pop-art movie from the '60s. (...) Then he realized that Salander was in costume. Usually her style was sloppy and rather tasteless. Blomkvist had assumed that she was not really interested in fashion, but that she tried instead to accentuate

¹² Asperger syndrome – an autism spectrum disorder. Social impairment, alongside obsessive weird behavior such as obsessive interests, repetitive behaviors. Those suffering from it have problems with understanding metaphorical level of language, irony, jokes and sarcasm they may develop certain talents for Science and Mathematics.

¹³ Larsson (2008: 19).

¹⁴ Larsson (2008: 43).

¹⁵ Larsson (2009: 1114).

her own individuality. Salander always seemed to mark her private space as hostile territory, and he had thought of the rivets in her leather jacket as a defence mechanism, like the quills of a hedgehog. To everyone around her it was as good a signal as any: Don't try to touch me – it will hurt. But here in the district court she had exaggerated her style to the point of parody. It was no accident; it was part of Giannini's strategy. If Salander had come in with her hair smoothed down and wearing a twin-set and pearls and sensible shoes, she would have come across as a con artist trying to sell a story to the court. It was a question of credibility. She had come as herself and no-one else. Way over the top – for clarity. She was not pretending to be someone she was not. Her message to the court was that she had no reason to be ashamed or to put on a show. If the court had a problem with her appearance, it was no concern of hers.¹⁶

Lewis Hyde in his work on tricksters gives the shortest definition of this mythical figure: "Trickster is a boundary-crosser".¹⁷

He also proves that: the trickster is able to blur the boundaries between the right and the wrong, sacred and profane, the male and female, clean and dirty, being young and being old, living and dead.¹⁸

Hyde observes, that tricksters are usually shape changers and that this ability enables them to migrate between different worlds. This is also true in case of Lisbeth Salander who changes her look and lifestyle while travelling between Sweden and Grenada. There, on that exotic island she may have illegal sources of money.

According to American researcher, trickster is the embodiment of ambivalence and ambiguity, duality and duplicity, contrasts and paradoxes. It is similar to Salander's nature: she is a genius but at the same time she has huge gaps in her education, she is pretty but also may be repulsive, she even may be good, as readers learn following the plot, though at some times she may turn into a merciless avenger. Her duality manifests itself in her bisexuality.

What makes Lisbeth different from the most of mythological tricksters are her motives – it is neither selfishness nor sheer manipulation in her case. Certainly, not every villain or anti-hero can be described as a trickster. As Helen Lock writes:

One of the most important recalls the trickster's differentiation from the fool: the trickster is not playing. Not just any rogue or anti-hero can properly be termed a trickster. The true trickster's trickery calls into question fundamental assumptions about the way the world is organized, and reveals the possibility of transforming them (even if often for ignoble ends).¹⁹

Lisbeth's actions question the widely known myth of Sweden as the welfare state of social order, taking care of its weakest citizens, in the name of equality and solidarity.

The third character that I am going to analyze is probably the one who is closest related to the mythological world. At the same time there is no direct connection with the Scandinavian world, although the novel *The Bat* is written by a Norwegian author Jo Nesbø. This work opens a series of novels about Harry Hole – investigator from Oslo. He is sent by his Norwegian superiors to Sidney, where he is going to lead the investigation in the case of a murder of a young Norwegian woman – Inger Holter. It occurs that she is not the only victim of the mysterious killer. He rapes and strangles white women with blond hair.

In the group of suspects one can find Otto Rechnagel – a clown-transvestite. But when he also falls victim and is murdered just before his final act during the circus show, and just after him a policeman involved in the investigation is killed in unclear circumstances, then Harry becomes anxious. He visits dive bars, walking down the dark streets of Sidney, which has topography of abyss of the Hell, constantly searching for the answers to the riddles of the utterly unknown to him culture. In this respect Nesbø's novel can be interpreted as an anthropological testimony since it tells a story about the confrontation of two worlds.

As the plot develops the Norwegian policeman meets a strange figure. Towoomba is a black boxer of aborigine origin. Already during the first encounter, while observing him at the boxing ring Harry pays attention to his animalistic nature. Aborigine behaves during the fight as if he were a cobra, moving slowly and lazily like in trance.

Animalistic nature of Towoomba is one of his most important features, he is clever and supple as well. His origin is mysterious – he does not know who his father is, his mother is an alcoholic. He be-

¹⁶ Larsson (2009: 919–920).

¹⁷ Hyde (1998: 7).

¹⁸ Hyde (1998: 7).

¹⁹ Lock (2002).

longs to the lost generation which was forced to assimilate with the white society at the expense of loss of their identity. His whole generation has become the subject to strict control, which bore unwished fruit- the Aborigines have climbed on the top position in the police statistics. Toowoomba was helped by his compatriot- a black policeman Andrew Kensington. It was Andrew who encouraged him to begin studies at university and to take up boxing. The boy apparently assimilated with the surroundings however deep inside Toowoomba belongs to two dissimilar realms – the one of the Western civilization, the other one is his original ethnic one. This dualism is yet ostensible, and the assimilation has only one goal – to survive in the hostile environment. Deep in his heart is Toowoomba an avenger of his humiliated nation. Harry Hole, like his Australian colleagues, has been deceived by this façade, not being aware that this Aborigine is a psychopathic killer of fair-haired women.

When the list of suspected rapidly starts to shrink Harry has to find a way how to find the murderer. He decides to use his own lover – a blond Swedish girl named Birgitta, who works in one of Sidney bars, as a bait. He suspects that the one who is guilty is Inger's ex-boyfriend, a drug dealer. To his surprise it occurs that Birgitta has been kidnapped by Toowoomba.

Playing a perverse game with Harry and putting his lover's life at stake Aborigine shows his hand. His slyness and ability to blend in with the background remind of those which Larstam, the postman from the novel by Mankell, possessed. He kidnaps Birgitta right under the police's nose. He lives in two different dwellings to mislead the followers – he has an official immaculate apartment where he lives and he kills his victims on the houseboat. Toowoomba belongs to two worlds: the modern western one and to the eternal Aborigine one, this makes him feel secure. Andrew, who treated him as his own son, was not able to inform the police about his crimes. The only thing he did was trying to put Harry on the right track, before Toowoomba killed him.

Killing women gives Toowoomba a perverted pleasure, satisfaction and power. While talking to Harry he expresses his surprise with the girls' gullibility and compares himself to a wolf from the tale about Red Riding Hood. He is exactly aware of being a psychopath and seems to be proud of that fact.

In Larstam's case was the choice of the victims dictated by sheer hatred. Toowoomba's actions are

more logical and his plan reminds of Loki's revenge on those who hurt him. Aborigine rapes and kills childless white women to take vengeance for what white men did to his nation. He compares white women to Aborigines' land, which was 'terra nullus' for white newcomers. He rapes them because nobody has impregnated them hence they belong to nobody.

Toowoomba follows also the archetypal picture taken from an old legend, which he tells once to Harry. It is a story of Bubbur snake that kidnaps beautiful Moora, who is warrior Walli's beloved. The snake is perfidious just as Toowoomba. Aborigine lies to the policeman promising him that no harm will be done to Birgitta. Similarly to Larstam and Salander he also has problems with his sexuality- he is homosexual and his steady partner is a transsexual clown.

In the narration of the Nesbø's novel there are two mythical stories, which seem to be only an exotic embellishment of the plot, as a reader may think at first, however they are the clue how to solve the riddle. The first one is told to Harry by Andre. Walla, the warrior, fell in love with a beautiful girl called Moora, but he could not marry her without obtaining some gifts for her. He went hunting and during his absence Moora was strangled by a huge snake – Bubbur. When Walla came back from hunting and realized what had happened he decided to take vengeance on the slimy creature. Using a deceit he killed the snake together with his offspring to avoid problems with the future. To sum up the tale Andrew advised to Harry to avoid the snakes. This piece of wisdom is connected with another legend, told that time by Toowoomba.

Black Snake used to be a harmless creature unlike the dangerous and venomous iguana. When all the animals from the jungle decided to get rid of iguana Black Snake became a volunteer but was made fun of as all the other animals regarded him as too weak and unimportant. But it was him who succeeded to win iguana's confidence and steal the venom from it. He used the poison to take revenge on the animals that had despised him before.

This mythical tale is an allegory of Toowoomba's fate, which he tells to completely unconscious Harry, giving him a hint who he is indeed.

Neither Andrew nor Toowoomba predict to what extent these mythical stories will be reflected in the life of main characters. In the final pursuit of a psychopathic murderer Harry recollects the story

told by Andrew. No sooner does Harry realize that he embodies himself in the role of Walla the warrior, and Toowoomba is Bubbur the snake. But it is not Harry who kills Aborigine. The monstrous shark from Sidney Aquarium eats the killer who accidentally has fallen into the water.

Literary trickster appearing in Scandinavian crime novels have neither such a sense of humour, nor playfulness as the Greek god Hermes, as a model trickster, had. They do not often laugh, although Toowoomba cackles while expressing his demands after having kidnapped his beloved one. Infernal Aborigine evokes trepidation similar to the one cause by Larstam and Joker. The trepidation which arises in face of uncontrolled madness while the created world being turned upside down as it is often performed by tricksters. That is the result of carnivalization, rejecting of the rules and laws of the sane world, mixing the high with the low, comedy with tragedy.

A topsy-turvy world appears also in the reality of Lisbeth Salander, where nothing happens to be as it should. A pathological family, father harassing the mother who is a prostitute, Lisbeth's stay in psychiatric hospital without being credibly diagnosed, a guardian who brutally rapes her instead of taking care of her, and finally the accusation her of committing a murder – all those events create an image of an insane, sullen and cruel world. Lisbeth exposes the system which instead of protecting the weaker citizens has become a deformed version of a welfare state.

Toowoomba exists as well in a topsy-turvy world adopting manners, smart outfit or practicing sports just for sake of appearances while in reality he does not belong mentally to the western culture, what is more he is hostile towards it. His deeds threaten the white community of Sidney and lead to the chaos in the ostensibly controlled world.

The other characteristic feature of mythological tricksters is breaking taboos. The social norms, regulations and prohibitions are not enough barriers for tricksters. They ignore rules which have not been set by them. Mercury, Prometheus, Loki or African Papa Legba, who appears in voodoo, are only a few mythical examples of such an attitude.

“Whether he is Amerindian, Oceanic, or African, the trickster hero commits such flagrant and scandalous violations of taboo that he seems to be constrained by indefeasible necessity. He incarnates

lack of discipline, disobedience, and rebellion, while defying simultaneously the rules of the society and those of the Superior Beings.”²⁰

Sometimes their breaking the rules has roots in the readiness to improve the fate of human race, however more often it is a result of demonic and perverse nature.

In all above cases the literary tricksters remind of their mythical prototypes. Åke Larstam breaks taboo connected with death and respect for human corpse. Not only does he kill innocent people but also makes compositions of the bodies. He creates a bizarre necro-show for his sick needs.

Lisbeth breaks law several times – someone's privacy or mail are not an enough barrier for her. She can plant a bug someone's flat, search through a computer disc when someone is completely unaware of this fact or even steal money from the bank account. She lives on the fringes of the society, according to her own norms what is not welcomed with the enthusiasm by many people. The media use her otherness to launch a smear campaign against her when in the second novel *The girl who played with fire* Lisbeth is accused of a double murder. Hailed by the tabloids as a “lesbian Satanist”, hounded and humiliated she fights back to regain peaceful life and to take vengeance on those who are guilty. She rebels against her father and brother leading vicariously to their death. While Toowoomba rebels against the order of the white man. Like Larstam he does not care about human life, he violates the bodies of murdered women. He even kills his lover and his best friend who was a father figure for him.

As we can observe while looking at the examples described above, Trickster is a very attractive model for literary characters, which can be widely used in crime fiction. Thanks to this deceiver a plot becomes unpredictable. Placing him among the most important characters gains an ambiguous overtone as tricksters' actions reveal the bitter truth about the social system, its shortages, mainly in the matters of security which should be provided to all the citizens by the state. Literary tricksters are personifications a complex, ambiguous archetypal pattern. Their presence places the narratives, which belong to the pop-literature, into a mythical scenario, thus broadening the horizon of interpretation.

²⁰ Makarius (1993: 82).

Modern versions of the myths are neither sacred texts nor bring the reader closer to the area of sacrum. But similarly to the myths their assignment is to tame humans with the world which might be both incompressible and threatening, hence they warn against the dangers, show alternative image of the reality in which order gives way to the chaos. One of the most spectacular ways of presenting the disarray is to use the figure of trickster, as the one who by his unpredictability increases the pace of the action and makes it even more difficult to solve the puzzle. Crime fiction has known many of them since its dawn. They have accompanied crime novels over the past decades creating a genuine parade of crooks.

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TRICKSTER STRATEGIES IN THE ARTISTS' AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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Art, artifice, articulations: the trickster as a methodological principle of artistic performance in ritual transactions with the otherly

"It's not what you see that is art; art is the gap."
Marcel Duchamp

Introduction

This paper focuses on artistic performance in and around the domain of quasi-religious delight in magical phenomena, an area that is traditionally a source of great fascination for artists. Using crop circle making as my example (ills. 1–3), I cast the Trickster as a mode of behaviour that counter-balances epistemological norms by confounding certainty, thus satisfying the need for stimulation beyond the order-direction that society tends to manufacture. This solicits fresh intellectual flexibility and the kind of improvisational spontaneity that is identified with creativity.¹ As catalytic action, the Trickster is central to art-making, especially in relation to human transactions with 'paranormal' phenomena, such as crop circles, as objects of folklore that challenge ontological orthodoxy. True to its own mythology, the Trickster dissolves the lines we draw and the values we impose to separate notions of 'genuine' and 'fake,' truth and fiction, 'reality' and performance, extracting art out of the twilight hinterland that sits betwixt and between

these constructions. Legend is myth contested as fact. In legend environments, the Trickster neutralises ideological hegemony – unfettered by cultural boundaries, it fosters competing discourse, encouraging a pluralism of ideas and endless potential for difference. As a methodology of art practice, it is action that invites risk and uncertainty.

Myth tends to be themed around the rearrangement of assumed boundaries such as change, death, and rebirth,² driving the development of human culture as part of a system that facilitates movement. Movement and flow are integral to mythical intervention; the Trickster works the joints articulating relations between make-believe (*mythos*) and 'rational' *logos*, in an effort to open new ontological vistas. In making this argument, I aim to contribute to a polyvocal, transdisciplinary understanding of the dynamics involved in social encounters with the otherly. This will involve reinterrogating formal notions of authorship, authenticity, and authority within contemporary art theory.

Metamorphosis

The popular idea of the mythical Trickster is of a sometimes divine, other times animal being, which

¹ Hallam & Ingold (2007: 1–24).

² Armstrong (2006: 142).



III. 1.
Lines: the outer reaches of
a crop circle at West Ken-
nett, Wiltshire, photo: au-
thor's archive



III. 2.
Ritual responses to a crop
circle and the surrounding
landscape at West Kennett,
Wiltshire, photo: author's
archive



III. 3.
A crop circle overlooking Sil-
bury Hill, Wiltshire, photo: au-
thor's archive

Ill. 4.

Henry Fuseli's *Scene from A Midsummer Night's Dream* Act IV. Satirical tensions between humanity's rage for godly order and chaotic, bestial instincts can be seen in stories where players acquire long furry ears and slip into trance-induced, fluidic states between lower, middle, and higher orders.



plays tricks and breaks rules.³ This figure appears in the folktales of nearly every traditional society as the personification of various latent alternatives to normative structure. In Europe, it emerged out of classical myth and satirical tensions brought about by the human rage for order and the inevitability of mess. For example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, no sooner had the world's creator "separated out everything within fixed limits"⁴ that the world was made animate, and a creature called Humankind installed to rule over all others. There follows a Golden Age when "humanity knew only its own shores,"⁵ having not yet discovered its bestial instincts, but then we do, and the ever-changing cosmos suddenly seems threatening. The myth describes fluidity between human, animal, and godly states. It embodies the continuous conflict of order and entropy, or, as Warner writes, "due organic change on the one hand and incongruous and disruptive mutation on the other."⁶

Warner observes that at the core of Ovid's poem is a structural contradiction that is only reconciled and made to work by the perpetual interplay of shifting values. The Trickster rules this domain, exemplified by ancient Greek notions of flux and poiesis; it is a sea of ambiguity comprising nanocosmologies identified by Conquergood as "kinesis as

movement, motion, fluidity, fluctuation, all those restless energies that transgress boundaries and trouble closure."⁷ As with the law of conservation, at the quantum level each particle is acting in counter-relation to its neighbour. These connections are repeated to infinite degrees creating a network of relations throughout the system, allowing for new ways of movement and an overall fuzzy equilibrium. This liquid field is a seamless *metaxy* between states, where elements are continuously open to adaptation, evolution, and revolution. It is a system designed so that every test of the structure equates to its reaffirmation, and old associations are always at risk. Shakespeare's Puck⁸ exemplifies this aspect of the Trickster's character whereby, through his own foolishness and that which he fosters in others, he manages to achieve a unity that reason often fails to accomplish, typically emerging triumphant out of catastrophic errors of judgment.⁹ Such is the value, and, to some, the appeal, of a methodology of risk, where outcomes of truly creative activity are uncertain; where artists relinquishes control of their work to what others make of it. This becomes all the more interesting when artworks are not necessarily perceived as such, but as magical triggers for imagination (ill. 4).

³ Hyde (1998).

⁴ Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, Bk I:68–88 Humankind).

⁵ Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, Bk I:89–112 The Golden Age).

⁶ Warner (2002: 75).

⁷ Conquergood (1995).

⁸ The Trickster protagonist in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (first performed in 1595).

⁹ Jung (1959/2010: 255–72).

Ineffable Intervals

That is, a reappraisal of the Trickster's traditional role suggests a much subtler identity with regard to art, where it mediates an interactive process. Here, the figure is depersonified and represents a species of human behaviour that adapts to the conditions of its existence not only by breaking rules but also, in the process, articulating new ones. Where Babcock-Abrahams noted that society creates orders and rules for the very drama attendant upon their being broken;¹⁰ the Trickster's role here has less to do with invention than ignition; it is the spark that fires between synapses of the indicative and the subjunctive. In certain cultural climates, artists perform a similar function – if the Trickster is a catalyst, political environments make ideal crucibles for its incendiary talents.

The multifarious activities of religioaesthetic attraction within contemporary Western culture abounds with Trickster activity; it emerges whenever we try to categorise and rationalise the non-rational. Freud's attempt to render the ineffable effable by separating out its "infantile" or "neurotic" elements,¹¹ was a task doomed to failure; any such taxonomy could never be complete without its being immediately invalidated – it is the nature of the Trickster, as an agent of change, to always find space to escape rationalistic dichotomy. Yet, Freud recognised this subject matter as an aesthetic problem. The etymological origin of 'aesthetics' (Gr: *aesthesis*) does not refer directly to art appreciation, nor to abstract thought, but to human perception and the senses. To Eagleton, aesthetics distinguishes between "the material and immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, that which is bound up in our creaturely life..."¹² a reference to Otto's "creature feeling" of absolute profaneness faced with the presence of the holy.¹³ The way we respond to sacred objects creates problems for certain accepted principles within contemporary art theory, such as the value placed on authorship, conventional notions of authenticity, and other 'detached' perspectives. But central to these formulations is the question of how, why, and

by whose authority, the authenticity of any sacred object is conferred by the beholder's perception of its origins. Crop circles are just one amongst many examples of (human) art whose power is based on their being perceived as being of divine origin. Following this argument, our relationship with art and sacred objects may be reduced to the following simple formula:

With the secularisation of art, human authorship supplants religious value; with the sacralisation of art, religious value supplants human authorship.

Of course, all this is subjective. As well as demonstrating the strength of suggestibility in artistic response, a recent study¹⁴ reveals the extent to which culture conditions expectation and shapes perception and experience. Trickster behaviour is fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous; it is deceitful and likes to play tricks; it shifts shape when it suits; it is likely to invert any given situation; it acts as both messenger and imitator of gods; it respects sacredness and vulgarity in equal measure.¹⁵ When visitors to Florida's *Holy Land Experience* cannot distinguish glass-fibre from the cold stone walls of Christ's tomb, or when any secondary reality is preferred over that which demonstrably exists, this is the Trickster at play. It is also present in the complicity that exists between crop circle-makers and crop circle 'researchers' as part of a cycle of deceptive collaboration. The popularity of the idea that crop circles are a scientific problem persists in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary: their 'mystery' is a contrivance, and the entire community involved, from crop circle makers to website administrators to conference organisers, tour operators, 'experts,' souvenir sellers, popular media, and even the people who visit crop circles, are complicit in maintaining the pretense.

¹⁰ Babcock-Abrahams (1975: 147–8).

¹¹ Freud (1917/2003: 151): "The infantile element about this, which also dominates the mental life of neurotics, is the excessive stress that is laid on psychical reality, as opposed to material reality..."

¹² Eagleton (1990: 13).

¹³ Otto (1917/58: 51).

¹⁴ Huang *et al* (2011) showed that a person's brain reacts differently to a work of art depending on whether they have been told it is 'authentic' (i.e., created by an Old Master) or an imitation. Martin Kemp, Emeritus Professor of the History of Art at Oxford University, one of the study's authors, told the BBC: We have proved what art historians, critics and the general public have long believed – that it is always better to think we are seeing the genuine article. Our study shows that the way we view art is not rational, that even when we cannot distinguish between two works, the knowledge that one was painted by a renowned artist makes us respond to it very differently.

(BBC News 6/12/11)

¹⁵ Hynes & Doty (1993: 33–45).

How we frame things affects our behaviour towards them. It is not necessary to either believe in, or to reject, the veracity of sacred objects to gain from the vision they offer. In presenting unexpected novelty that threatens, cajoles and ultimately ridicules extremes of belief and certainty, the Trickster invites new ways to perceive this kind of material – the trick is to go with the flow and remain open to the possibilities they offer. It is also important to remember that deception (both self-deceit and strategically directed toward others) can reveal new truths, and is therefore fundamental to art (e.g., illusion) and religion (e.g., holy fakes), and science (e.g., undiscovery; incompetence) in how it can be used to construct or deconstruct social objects. Behaviour known to folklorists as *ostension*¹⁶, a form of legend telling performed as social drama, is a classic Trickster strategy: to show and not tell, instead throwing shadows and allowing an object's mythical context to come to the fore, thus triggering an intriguing, playful combination of mystery, legend, and felt experience. Likewise, the efficacy of much religious or ritual art, from acheiropoiètic icons, to artifacts such as the *Sudarium*, or Veil of Veronica, and the 'Turin Shroud,' to African voodoo, to crop circles, is predicated upon the invisibility of the artist. Based on the transparency of divisions between religious experience and art, I would argue that it is only when such legendary phenomena are not perceived as art (in the conventional sense) that their *success* as art is assured.¹⁷ This may seem like anathema to the rationalist, but we are not rational beings. Myth returns art to its roots. As Harpur observed, it "displays the structure of the imagination more clearly than what we accept as 'high culture,' [...] returning to a simplicity that almost seems unauthored, anonymous."¹⁸ Walter Benjamin also recognised this distinction: "Art teaches us to look into objects," he said. "Folk art [...] allows us to look outward from within objects."¹⁹

Art and science are rooted in the same foundational principle. The philosopher Paul Feyerabend (who compared his brand of epistemological anarchy to that openly Tricksterish art movement, Dada) argued that science and rationality are not

universal measures of excellence. There is no proposition, however unfashionable and absurd, that is not capable of improving our knowledge.²⁰ Both art and science require intuitive thinking, creating narrative suspense that acts in tensile opposition to cultural norms and received wisdom. The ensuing ambiguity gives breathing space for speculations that may, at least at first, relate more to the poetic imaginal than they do to the rational intellect. To rationalists inclined to see reality in purely material terms, these ideas are easily tested, and disregarded. On another level, however, they are an invitation to proceed beyond prescribed limits of understanding in search of deeper meaning. Another philosopher, Mary Midgley, argues that, rather than being the opposite of science, art and myth play a central role in deciding the significance of knowledge acquisition within any community.²¹ Recognition of false phenomena invites the kind of discontinuous leaps of scientific advance that are often only achieved, observed Feyerabend, by 'irrational,' counter-inductive and unscientific methods. The Trickster's role in these negotiations is not to lure percipients into a false reality, away from truth, but to bring alternate reality into the everyday, thereby uncovering access to new truths and ensuring flow between 'as is' and 'as if,' and, crucially, "what if?"

The Space Between

Within the folds and vortices of that Western cultural construct known as the "artworld,"²² the main exponent of this kind of approach to art-making was Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp saw art as something that happens as a result of a collaborative process between maker and recipient rather than residing solely in any object – is an extension of the object, contained within the inexpressible *x-quotient* that fills "the gap" between the maker's unexpressed intentions and unintended expression in the form of responses and interpretations on the part of recipients.²³

As a mechanism of perpetual irony, the Trickster articulates such tensions of opposites. Analogously, Duchamp spoke of the "corridor of humour" that led from the oppositional Dada to the more

¹⁶ From the Latin *ostendere* meaning 'to show.'

¹⁷ Bateson (1972: 134) observed that confusion of 'rational solutions' and aesthetic processes occurs whenever we are confounded by art, or ritual, or myth.

¹⁸ Harpur (1994: 124).

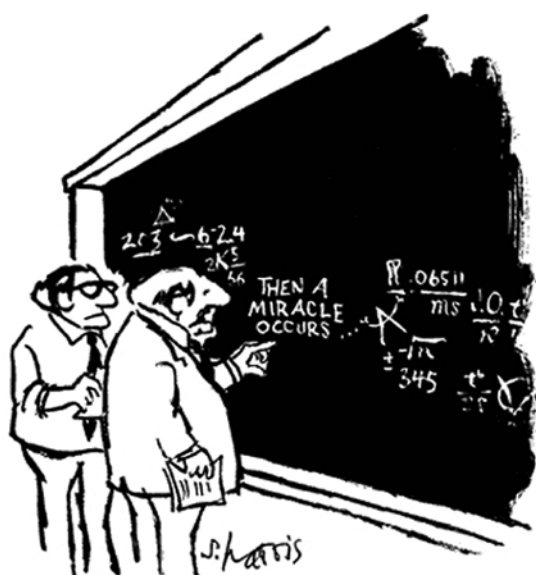
¹⁹ Benjamin (1999: 279).

²⁰ Feyerabend (1975/2010: xxxii–xxviii).

²¹ Midgley (2004: 1).

²² Danto (1964).

²³ Duchamp (1957).



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

Ill. 5. Sidney Harris, *Miracle*, copyright: ScienceCartoons-Plus.com

good-humoured Surrealist movement. Hyde offers another variation, based on the Latin root of the word 'humour' – fluidity: "The escape from this trap of mere opposition is some third thing... a pore through which fluid may move into new areas."²⁴ To Duchamp, the original inspirational vision of the artist can never be fully expressed because it lives outside the scope of our ability to contain it within any given structure; it is naturally dissonant, antistructural. As he explained in a lecture in 1957:

In the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work.²⁵

He expanded on this in an interview with the art historian Arturo Schwarz:

What art is in reality is this missing link, not the links that exist. It is not what you see that is art; art is the gap.²⁶

The gap, then, is a field of mediation between projection and retrospection; it is brimming with

the potential for novelty to be expelled from the merging of these two disparate textual universes.²⁷

In Sidney Harris' cartoon, a professor is analysing his student's equation (ill. 5). The first module is joined to the latter part by an ambiguous proposition: "Then a miracle occurs." If the gap is the condition in which a miracle may occur, the Trickster is the miracle worker: the gap is an ideal (abstract) condition for the (abstract) Trickster to operate (abstractly) as a spark between poles, ensuring the potential to expel something unique, or 'irrational' from the union²⁸ – the indefinable coefficient that gives meaning to an equation. Myth and much art are preoccupied with those areas that exist between categories, and the same is true of any activity that performs the extraordinary. As the political theorist Jane Bennett observed, "the fanciful and the real, like the virtual and the actual, are incestuous partners (and) we have no choice about their being connected; what counts is how we mobilise the connections."²⁹

As with Puck's initial endeavours in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, sometimes the Trickster's attempts at unification fail: "No matter. Try again. Fail again. *Fail better*," advised Beckett.³⁰ In its dual role as messenger and interpreter, the Trickster brings meaning to us and brings it out *in* us, revealing it *through* us sometimes as 'art,' sometimes as something holy, or an intriguing, syncretic combination of these very human concepts. It is a complex, protean creature, feeding off difference, creating difference, transforming its environment by a process of continual flux, turning fancy into real life in the form of evidence, relics, and lived experience. Sometimes it fails. Occasionally, it shits gold.

Conclusion

My general argument is that the politics of contestation and polarisation which tends to manifest whenever humans construct subjective certainties that invite opposition – e.g., myth-based 'facts' or legends, or dogma – invites outbreaks of performa-

²⁴ Hyde (1993: 274).

²⁵ Duchamp (1957).

²⁶ Schwarz (1975: xxxii); also Judovitz (1998: 135).

²⁷ This is very evident in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (first performed in 1595), as Puck falls victim to 'wrong' interpretations of his, or actually his master's, intentions. Puck himself, as intermediary, cannot control but only influence outcomes.

²⁸ Babcock-Abrahams (1973).

²⁹ Bennett (2001: 162).

³⁰ Beckett (1983).

tive activity that shares characteristics traditionally associated with the Trickster. The autonomous Trickster is ambivalent towards all ideology, acting in opposition as it sees fit. It supports and destabilises both theses and antitheses in equal measure in attempting to a balanced platform for conjecture. This strategy generates difference, fresh dichotomy, and endless discourse. Difference is a by-product the Trickster plays with, consumes, and makes its own. As with any philosophical system that incorporates ambiguity as integral to its structure, the artist/trickster is both a consumer and regurgitator, recycling its waste in order to sustain the system, an artistic activity that shares kinship with ritual, performance, play, and other spontaneous activities.

The Trickster's role is comparable to earlier philosophical principles of the 'coincidence of opposites'³¹ based on the Neoplatonic belief that truth is implicit in an alternative that always manages to escape rigid dichotomies. This activity thrives in the spaces that emerge within the rolls and folds of culture clash.³² Pararealms (parody, paranormal, paradox etc) – i.e., belonging *inside* a system that includes things *and* their opposites – are the Trickster's natural habitat, offering ideal conditions to exploit the human proclivity to use the art and the sacred as lenses to see beyond the everyday. Turning the lens around reveals the internal workings of the performative processes that drive modern folklore. In legend environments, the psychological space between map and territory is essentially semiotic. In the gap between 'is' and 'as if', the Trickster gives form to the capacity of the human organism to misinterpret or invent. This is why I have adopted this principle as a methodology for my own research into art practice, where legend generates art, which generates more legend, and so on. Even today, the Trickster has a particular relevance in a society that is ruled by folk but is no longer governed by god/s.

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³¹ Hynes in Hynes & Doty (1993: 34).

³² Encouragingly, the 2011 conference closed with a lively discussion about lines that divide not only nations and political ideologies, and behaviour, but also notions of authenticity, genuineness, the 'real', and the Trickster's role in keeping them moving, dissolving dogma.

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